THE ISLE

Being a Faithful Relation of Sundry Proceedings Conducted Beyond the Reach of Law,

Wherein Is Demonstrated, by Examples the Most Lurid, That the Professions of Power Are Ever the Masks of Vice, and the Guardians of Order Its Most Zealous Destroyers.

Collected with Exactitude, and Published for the Benefit of the Inquisitive,
that Posterity may discern the true Character of those who clothe their Appetites in the Robes of Virtue.

“Behold, I shew you a Mystery: not that Vice corrupts Power,
but that Power, unveiled, is Vice itself.”

Printed for the Anonymous Author, and sold by all Booksellers of Note, at the Sign of the Ruined Temple, near the Blackfriars Bridge.

MDCCLXXXIV

Price One Shilling, bound in Calf, with Cuts.

Prelude

There are, in this world, certain places whose existence cannot be proven by map or compass, yet whose shadow falls upon every latitude. These are the enclaves beyond law, the secret jurisdictions of appetite, where time is governed not by the sun’s passage but by the pulse of desire. In such places, seasons do not change, only masks. There is no spring but the renewal of schemes; no autumn but the fall of virtue into disrepair.

It is one such dominion—an Isle remote not merely in its geography but in the deliberate exile of its conscience—that concerns us here. I shall not trouble the reader with coordinates, for the Isle has none that the sober mind can bear to record. It exists at that remove where maps blur into speculation, and speculation into invitation. To speak of it too precisely would be to invite the hand that draws borders to tremble.

Its governors—if such a word can be applied to those who have banished the very notion of governance—are men who have perfected the art of libertinage to the point of jurisprudence. Here, corruption is not merely permitted; it is codified, canonized, rehearsed like a sacrament until it passes for truth. These men do not believe themselves wicked, for wickedness presupposes a moral law against which one might trespass. They have abolished that law, root and branch, and in its place erected the altar of their own appetites.

And yet, dear reader, do not imagine these precincts to be crude or unpolished. The Isle is no debauched marketplace of the common rabble’s lusts; its rites are conducted with a care that would shame a cathedral. The walls themselves, the air heavy with its peculiar perfumes, seem complicit in the suppression of virtue. The stones are ancient enough to remember other crimes, and discreet enough to speak of none.

But what gives the Isle its most exquisite cruelty is not its isolation, nor its ceremonies, nor even the perfection of its secrecy. It is this: the Isle is not so far removed from our own cities, our own parlors, our own chambers of governance, as we should wish to believe. The same tempers, the same designs, the same hunger for mastery over another’s will—all find here their purest form, but they are born elsewhere.

Here begins our account: a voyage from the familiar into the consummate; from the law’s veneer into the marrow of its absence. Let the reader, then, prepare not for a fiction to be enjoyed, but for a truth to be endured. For in

the mirror of the Isle one will not see the noble defenders of order they so loudly proclaim themselves to be, but the grinning authors of its ruin—men who clothe their appetites in the threadbare finery of “virtue,” and the simpering lackeys who mistake such garments for the raiment of kings.

I. The Magnate, the Youth, and the Curator

Before we embark upon our voyage to that forbidden and foreboding Isle in which the affluent and high-esteemed men cosset their appetites, it is worth acquainting the reader with the principle players of our theme. A wealthy magnate, his unwitting and unwilling youthful accomplice to the forthcoming crimes to which we will shortly bare witness, as well as his willing accomplice in the forthcoming crimes well known as the curator, distributor, and cultivator of feminine wares.

The Magnate was a man whose bulk seemed the product not of gluttony alone, but of some cosmological contract with excess itself. At the summit, a citadel of hair— a golden palisade, less grown than engineered — encircled the crown of his head like the ramparts of a fortress built to keep out shame. Beneath it, the brow, low and dense, bore the sheen of a perpetual summer, as though the man's humors ran perpetually warm and secreted their evidence without restraint. The eyes were twin coals sunk deep in banks of fleshy drift, their glances darting like pickpockets in a crowd. His cheeks, bulbous and suffused with the sanguine bloom of habitual excess, framed a mouth whose line was perpetually wet — whether with the remnants of some recent banquet or with the mere anticipation of the next. When he spoke, the lips parted in a slow, oiled movement, revealing teeth of an improbable uniformity, each capped and polished so that they resembled nothing so much as a row of minor thrones, ready to seat the morsels that courtiers pressed upon them. From that fleshy precipice descended a chin of such soft abundance it might have been sculpted from risen dough.

Descending from the face, the neck was less a column than a stacked parade of folds, each with its own climate and subtle fragrance, the result of years spent in collars that squeezed only for effect, never for discipline. His belly, vast and domed, thrust outward with the confident indecency of a sovereign who has long since banished the notion of constraint. It bore upon its surface the faint traceries of veins like rivers mapped in pale relief, and it shifted with the gentle, liquid momentum of a tide responding to the moon's command. His belly jutted forward with the authority of a potentate's decree, yet was wrapped in garments cut so finely that the seams seemed to groan with flattery. His face, wide and moon-bright, was preserved in a state of constant self-congratulation, the smile and the sneer each having staked equal claim upon his lips. Below, his legs — pale yet thick as oaken trunks — terminated in feet that, despite the shoemaker's cunning, betrayed their swelling in seams straining like the bonds of a too-patient jailer. His gait,

therefore, was a slow and ceremonial rolling, as if each step were the measured concession of a monarch to the ground beneath him.

The Magnate’s person, already an edifice of excess, was crowned — or perhaps undergirded — by that appendage which, to his mind, justified the whole enterprise of his being. It was no delicate instrument wrought for subtle pleasures, but a monumental contrivance, more architectural than anatomical. Though its dimensions could not rival the fantastical boasts he dispensed over banquets and in locker rooms, it possessed a girth of lipidity that seemed less the result of nature’s generosity than of a gradual accretion, as a riverbank fattens over years of silting.

In repose, it hung with the solemn gravity of a great bell, the kind that tolls not to call the faithful to worship but to announce the execution of a criminal. The shaft, thick and cylindrical, seemed less the product of nature’s whim than of slow, geological formation — a stalactite of flesh laid down layer upon layer by years of unrestrained appetite. Its surface bore the cartography of a long and ignoble career: subtle discolorations like the tarnish of ancient bronze; faint creases at its base, as if the skin itself had memories of past exertions; a scattering of wiry hairs arranged in no order that could be mistaken for grooming.

When roused — which was often, and frequently at the behest of causes unknown to anyone including himself — it strained against its confines with a slow, ponderous arrogance, like a corpulent magistrate adjusting himself upon the bench. Its summit was a bulbous protuberance, fittingly gleaming with the wanton self-satisfaction of a ruthlessly homicidal sovereign surveying conquered lands—a position to which the magnate himself will have successfully aspired by the end of his sullied mortal toil. Even when utterly quiescent, it carried the air of something that had performed great labors and believed itself entitled to endless laurels. Those who encountered it (willing or, more often, not) often remarked — in tones they believed private — on the peculiar odor, a mingling of costly though ineffective eau de toilette and a sweaty, fungal musk much older, more intrinsic, carnal, and foul that even the most vigorous ablutions could not fully dispel.

To comprehend the depravity of the man’s psychophysical form, one must indeed attend to that most ungracious region at the rearward compass-point — that hinterland which, though customarily veiled by drapery and discretion, declared itself in him as loudly as a demagogue on parade. The odour alone betrayed its double parentage: part stale lye soap, applied with the half-hearted piety of a man who confuses ritual for cleanliness; part

something less civilized, a deeper musk more candid in its testimony to neglected duties.

The skin, where it could be glimpsed, was a parchment of dryness, flaking like the peeling paint of an abandoned temple of Venus. Through this brittle terrain sprouted the unkempt vestiges of hair — once a proud golden that had since travelled the full spectrum of corruption: here greyed to an exhausted ash, there stained orange as though rust had crept into the follicle, and elsewhere blackened outright, as if soot had settled in protest at so inhospitable a domicile.

And if these sordid adornments failed to convince, the architecture of the region completed the case. Rolls of excess anthropomorphous lard folded upon one another like minutes taken down badly in committee: each layer gave the illusion of substance while concealing nothing but the weakness beneath. It was as though nature, embarrassed at the sight, had tried to stuff the deformity into itself, only to succeed in multiplying the shame by duplication.

In sum, the man’s posterior was less the seat of dignity than the archive of his character: perfumed in haste, neglected in fact, and possessed of that peculiar knack for swelling outward to demand attention while collapsing inward to reveal only rot.

He had entered the world in a city where the very dust was worth more than the sweat of its makers, and from birth had imbibed the conviction that the earth’s riches were the natural inheritance of those who possessed the skill of acquisition without the vulgarity of production. His youth was spent in rooms lit by chandeliers whose crystals had been plucked from mountains halfway across the world, and in parlors where the air was perpetually thick with the incense of imported sycophancy. The Magnate’s mind — such as it was — contained no map of virtue except that which led him toward profit, and no vocabulary for failure except the word “loser,” which he pronounced with a drawl as though savoring the slow evisceration of its subject.

The Youth, by contrast, was of a stature and carriage so precise it seemed assembled by an obsessive craftsman who valued symmetry above humanity. His frame was narrow, angular, and tense, as if his bones had been pulled too tightly over the spool of his convictions. His gait and posture were all tension and austerity — narrow shoulders pulled back in permanent readiness, a face pale as vellum stretched tight over a scaffolding of bone. His eyes, at once vigilant and beady, roved ceaselessly as if to ensure the

world had not drifted from the propositions he cherished. His mouth, narrow and exacting, seemed cut not for pleasure but for pronouncement, each word launched like a dart toward some invisible target of error. His skin, pale to the point of translucence, was stretched across his skull like parchment upon which the scribes of his forebears had written all their apprehensions about the world. His nose, sharp and unyielding, jutted forth as though it might pierce through the falsehoods of the age — though it more often served to punctuate his own pronouncements.

The Youth’s own endowment, proportionate to his frame, invited no discourse nor comment. He kept it so jealously sequestered from speculation that even imagination, finding no purchase, soon turned away.

Of the Youth’s corporeal geography, perhaps the most unintentionally appropriate was that unvisited province at his rearmost compass-point — the territory he ignored as wholly as he ignored the cries of the rabble in his polemics. Nature had shaped it with a delicacy that, on another frame, might have been called comely: two pale, modest crescents, tapering to a narrow cleft whose shadowed depths suggested — in spite of himself — a certain maidenly reserve. Yet if one were to behold it, an activity in which nary even the Youth’s wife would or could stoop herself to partake, the more the illusion of purity dissolved, replaced by the unmistakable signs of an owner too absorbed in his idealism to supervise his own citadel.

It was the neglect that spoke loudest. Here, a faint duskiness of skin from too-long conferences conducted seated; there, a suggestion of dryness at the edges, the work of overstarched linens and an indifference to emollients. A subtle musk, not of exertion but of unventilated confinement, seemed to cling — as if the air in that quarter had been, for years, an afterthought. One might almost imagine that, had he ever condescended to inspect it in a mirror, the Youth might have blushed at its tell-tale want of polish; but mirrors, in his world, were for the face and the knot of the cravat, never for the regions a gentleman preferred to think of as theoretical.

There were, too, the tell-tale fissures of repression: the skin dry to parchment, with little cracks like marginalia in a student’s book, notes left by nature recording each time he clenched against the very appetites he so volubly denounced. It was an arid landscape, barren of softness, yet offering no firmness in recompense. In its meagerness it verged upon the feminine, yet in its neglect it abandoned even that consolation.

If the Magnate’s hinder parts were a swollen monument to excess, then the Youth’s could only be described as their spectral parody, a chastened afterthought of anatomy. So narrow was this region, so meager its projection, that it seemed less designed for the burdens of manhood than for the fastidious contortions of a schoolboy forever perched upon a bench of logic. The lumps — if that ample word may be forgiven — possessed a wan pallor that suggested they had been kept too long under the tyranny of starch and sermon, their surfaces chafed by overzealous linen and scrubbed past all natural bloom.

Nor did the air around him conspire to his rescue. For though the Magnate announced himself with a banquet of odours, the Youth betrayed a subtler failing: the faint, sour whiff of neglect disguised as fastidiousness, the smell of soap wielded more as theory than as practice. Here was no honest musk, but rather the ghost of cleanliness attempted and abandoned, as if reason itself had declared that what lay behind was beneath the jurisdiction of inspection.

It was a paradox worthy of his own logic: that a man so punctilious in the ordering of arguments could be so careless in the ordering of flesh; that he could declaim at length on the hygiene of the body politic while the most literal precinct of his own went untended. Whether he dimly suspected this neglect and shrouded it in the mists of conscious denial, or whether it lay wholly beneath his notice, is uncertain. But among the few who had cause to take stock of it, there was general agreement: that this pale and prim extremity, for all its outward propriety, was an unwitting invitation to mockery.

Thus the Youth’s posterior revealed itself, as did every other part of him, to be an argument poorly defended: fragile where it pretended to be fortified, neglected where it proclaimed vigilance, and forever anxious that, at any moment, some rude eye might discover the contradiction in its very constitution.

From his earliest years, the Youth had been nourished not on milk, but on the distilled dicta of ancient lawgivers, the catechisms of merchants who mistook profit for Providence, and the solemn, staccato rhythms of sacred texts recited more for their certainty than their beauty or veracity. The youth’s childhood household was one where each meal was a tribunal, each bedtime story an exposition of duty and doctrine. Where other boys collected pebbles, he collected rhetorical accouterments shrouded under the façade of

syllogism— sorted and classified, their edges polished by ceaseless rehearsal in front of mirrors or indulgent elders.

The pungent timbre of his voice stood in stark contrast to the masculine certitude of his convictions—shrill, effeminate, and sickly. An irritating emission of a child in desperate need of suppository to cure an enduring nasal malady which no apothecary had the decency nor skill to provide. Indeed, the youth's manner of speech had such a rapid cadence and metallic flavor it betrayed no patience for the languor of pleasantries. It sought only to slice, to define, to conquer the fog of human ambiguity with the blade of an airtight logical implicature.

The Youth and the Magnate were united not by friendship, nor by any shared conception of the Good, but by a mutual understanding that the world was a banquet from which the weak must be elbowed aside. The Magnate admired the Youth's capacity for relentless justification; the Youth, in turn, unconsciously regarded the Magnate as living proof that vulgar power, wrapped in sufficient gold leaf, might wear the garments of triumph. Both men saw in the other a grotesque reflection of his own nature — distorted, yet alluring. They met not through affinity, but through a mutual appetite for domination in their respective spheres — the Magnate over flesh, the Youth over ideas. Each saw in the other a grotesque but alluring distortion of himself: the Magnate admired the Youth's capacity to justify any cruelty in syllogistic form; the Youth admired the Magnate's proof that power, if vast enough, absolves its possessor from all accountability.

Only after such prodigious detailing of their forms, their origins, and their appetites might we proceed to the hour in which the Magnate, flushed with an inspiration equal parts mischief and vanity, resolved to import the Youth to an isle spoken of only in the hushed tones of those who trafficked in the rarest coin of all: impunity. Yet before we journey to such a lethally saccharine destination, we must remark at some length on the man who made the tawdry and vicious events to which we will shortly bare witness all possible.

The Master of the Isle was known among his own circle — which was to say, the very pinnacle of the social mound, where the air thinned and the morals dissolved — as *the Curator*. Not because he preserved beauty, but because he catalogued depravity with a librarian's diligence. From a distance, the Curator's stature seemed unthreatening, even slight, the kind that vanishes into a dinner crowd and reappears, inexplicably, in the heart of a scandal. Up close, the deception collapsed: his limbs, thin but sinewy, had the tension of

snares; his torso was a bony reliquary for appetites that had outlived both youth and scruple. The skull, shaven to a sheen, emerged from a neck mottled with sunspots and the faint map of old scars, as if the skin itself had rebelled against him over the decades.

His eyes were of the pale, washed-out blue peculiar to certain taxidermied predators — all depth bleached away, leaving only a cold gleam that suggested calculation without conscience. They sat in sockets slightly too large, giving him the look of a man perpetually startled by his own thoughts. Below them, the cheeks were gaunt but pocked with the ghosts of adolescent indulgences left untreated, and in moments of mirth (which came often and without warning) the skin wrinkled into fissures deep enough to hold a drop of wine.

His mouth, small and pinched, was framed by lips the color of overcooked meat, forever wet as though some inner sluice refused to close entirely. His teeth were the only part of him that had ever seen true maintenance — capped, polished, and faintly glowing in a way that brought to mind not health but artifice. When he smiled, it was the smile of a man who had just bought something priceless at a criminal discount. The Curator’s hands were the most unsettling: long, birdlike fingers tipped with nails buffed to a dull shine, the pads faintly ridged from a lifetime of counting currency and caressing contracts. They moved constantly, as if seeking some surface to own, some object to claim.

Of all the Curator’s physical peculiarities, none was more pitiable, more disturbingly humorous, than that portion of his anatomy which he most absurdly believed to be his instrument of conquest. It was a structure of such meagerness that the term “appendage” seems an overstatement. In repose — which was its native state — it withdrew upon itself like a snail startled by daylight, leaving only a pale, wrinkled glans peeking from the slack collar of its foreskin, as though embarrassed by its own exposure. The shaft, such as it was, possessed the hue of undercooked poultry, marbled faintly with veins too timid to stand out, and bore a faint translucence that made one half-expect to see light pass through it. Like the Magnate’s member, his own endowment lacked the length of the tales of his masculine braying, yet unlike the Magnate’s it also lacked noteworthy girth for the Curator was markedly less edified by the vice of gastric gluttony than his more extensionally prodigious peer.

When summoned to exertion — an event requiring as much coaxing as the revival of an ancient, reluctant relic — it stiffened only reluctantly, achieving

a posture that could more accurately be described as “defensively alert” than truly erect. The upward curve was not the proud arch of the virile but the hesitant bend of a structure aware of its own inadequacy. Its dimensions were such that a generous observer might compare it to the smallest finger of a glove size clerk, though with far less girth, and its surface retained an almost infantile softness that gave the queasy impression of something not yet finished by nature. The scent, too, was singular: a mingling of stale brine, the must of neglected drawers, and the faint chemical tang of the medicated powders he applied in the futile hope of masking its more organic complaints.

Yet in the Curator’s mind, this feeble organ was a royal seal — a talisman whose mere presentation should command awe. He flaunted it in private with the same confidence he applied to arranging heads of state beside disgraced actors at his table, convinced that the incongruity was itself proof of genius. Those who endured its unveiling were often struck by a crisis of reaction: to laugh was to court offense, to retch was to court danger, and to blush was to admit complicity. Most chose silence, which the Curator took for admiration.

His story was the kind of fable that polite society tells itself to justify its worst compromises. Born in a borough where even the rats were rumored to pay rent, he had discovered early that information was the only commodity that grew cheaper the more of it one acquired. By his twenties, he was a broker of introductions — the man who could seat a bishop beside a pornographer, a senator beside a smuggler, and have them all leave believing they had been in the company of equals. Officially, he was a philanthropist, a patron of the arts, a mentor to the promising young. Unofficially, he was the ferryman between the shores of influence and appetite. His mansion was a port-of-call for every species of hunger too rare or too ruinous to be sated in the open. Those who dealt with him for the first time often mistook his soft voice and deferential posture for servility. This was a mistake they did not make twice. For beneath that calm shimmered a simple conviction, honed over decades: *Everything and everyone has its use. The trick is only to keep the ledger balanced so the merchandise never knows it has been sold.*

Between the Magnate and the Curator there existed no bond that the sentimental could misinterpret as friendship, nor even the brittle camaraderie that soldiers feel after sharing a trench. What lay between them was a tacit, thoroughly Machiavellian compact, hammered out in glances and silences rather than signatures: each recognized in the other a craftsman of

appetites, a merchant in the same rare and dangerous wares. The Magnate, with his booming vulgarity and talent for spectacle, could summon clients and prey alike with the ease of a carnival barker promising wonders inside the tent. The Curator, gaunt and unblinking, could sift those crowds like a jeweler separating gems from paste, ensuring that only the most malleable, the most dependent, the most compromisingly compromised ascended to the Isle.

In the Magnate's eyes, the Curator's genius lay in his invisibility: where the Magnate strode through scandals like a conquering general parading spoils, the Curator slipped through them like smoke, leaving no trace but the faint scent of singed reputations. In turn, the Curator regarded the Magnate as an ideal lightning rod — a man so shamelessly conspicuous that his very presence drew scrutiny away from subtler operators. They understood each other's vices without disapproval, each knowing that judgment between them would be as hypocritical as two spiders condemning each other for web-weaving. Theirs was a commerce of mutual use and abuse: the Magnate would deliver his glittering entourage to the Isle, and the Curator would supply the setting, the staff, and the assurance that all indiscretions would be archived — not destroyed — for later leverage.

When disputes arose, they were resolved in the same way they had begun: not with raised voices or threats, but with a faint tightening of the eyes, a subtle shifting of terms, a recalibration of debt and favor. Both men knew that to sever their connection outright would deprive each of a necessary limb; and so they maintained it in the same way one tolerates a chronic ailment — with grudging adaptation, occasional exploitation, and never the folly of cure. It was this understanding — colder than alliance, warmer than indifference — that set the stage for the Youth's invitation. For the Magnate knew that the Curator delighted in novices: fresh minds still capable of scandalized denial, fresh flesh still convinced it was incorruptible. And the Curator knew that the Magnate's greatest amusement came from watching such convictions rot in real time.

II. The Isle and its Edifice

And so the Curator stood upon his Isle — gaunt, gleaming, and ever-smiling — not as its prisoner but as its gravitational center, drawing in every Magnate and Magistrate who craved impunity and every Youth who mistook proximity to power for an education. The Magnate had planned shortly one of his many visits to the Curator’s carefully cultivated carnival of corporeal consumption. On this visit, he would bring the youth, even though he sophomorically thought himself already learned, hoping to enlighten the young one in the science of seductively sadistic sensuality. Yet before we acquaint ourselves with the events of this tale, we must first understand the place in which the Youth shall be at once enlightened and defiled.

The official maps — those printed for schools and shipping offices — have never acknowledged the Isle. To the bureaucratic eye, it is a shoal too treacherous for navigation, a barren rock unworthy of claim. But in the archives of certain defunct merchant companies, among the loose folios of colonial governors, and in the memoranda of lawyers who specialized in the discreet relocation of wealth, the Isle’s history can be read in a sequence of increasingly improbable proprietorships.

The earliest extant record dates to 1784, when the Isle was noted in the log of a French fur trader as “an elevated reef crowned with trees, where no wave ever sleeps.” In that same year, a certain Vicomte de Romainville, fleeing both creditors and a duel in which he had failed to appear, purchased the rock from the trader for three casks of brandy and the promise of safe passage to Montreal. The Vicomte, whose private life was a labyrinth of mistresses, mistreated servants, and unpaid debts to craftsmen, erected a crude hunting lodge on the cliff. His entertainments there, if contemporary pamphlets are to be believed, involved contests of “unnatural endurance” among his guests, the details of which were censored even in the most salacious broadsides.

Upon his death — brought about, according to some sources, by a fall from the cliff while chasing a servant girl — the Isle passed through the hands of a Dutch smuggler named Pieter van Droogen, whose trade in untaxed spirits masked a more profitable commerce in abducted adolescents from coastal villages. Van Droogen expanded the lodge into a fortified manse, added the concealed harbor, and installed the first iteration of the underground cells, which he called, with sardonic flourish, “the Seminary.”

By the mid-19th century, the property had been acquired by an English industrialist, Sir Horace Welcombe, who presented himself in public as a philanthropist and patron of the sciences. In reality, he used the Isle as a private laboratory for “anthropometric studies,” which involved measuring the bodies of orphans imported under the guise of apprenticeship. His personal papers — seized after his death by an illegitimate son — reveal sketches of elaborate apparatuses designed to “test the fortitude” of his subjects, though the precise nature of these trials remains a matter of speculation.

At the turn of the 20th century, an American timber magnate, Leland K. Mersham, purchased the Isle in exchange for forgiving a foreign minister’s gambling debts. Mersham razed most of the existing structures and commissioned a sprawling Gothic revival mansion in their place, its spires visible from miles at sea. Mersham was a man of puritanical speech and libertine practice; he entertained senators, opera singers, and gangsters alike, ensuring that each left with a souvenir in the form of a photograph whose future use he carefully considered. It was under his tenure that the gardens were laid out in their current obscene geometries, the design entrusted to a landscape architect later confined to an asylum for “irrepressible visionary tendencies.”

The scandal that finally forced the Mersham family from the Isle erupted in 1932, when a cache of correspondence was intercepted by the postal authorities, revealing an arrangement between the patriarch’s heirs and a syndicate of “pleasure purveyors” in Havana. The ensuing trial was held in camera, the records sealed, and the estate quietly sold to a consortium of unnamed buyers, rumored to include a pair of princes from a minor European house.

Throughout the middle decades of the 20th century, the Isle’s ownership passed in irregular succession — sometimes through sale, sometimes through forfeiture in games of extraordinary stakes. One of its more notorious stewards was a shipping tycoon who used its harbor to receive goods uninspected, a convenience that allowed him to host “gatherings” for clients whose tastes, while mutually exclusive in public, converged neatly in private. Another was a film producer whose cinematic flops were matched only by the success of the “screen tests” he held in the mansion’s west gallery.

It was in the last quarter of the century that the property came into the hands of the man now known as the Curator. His acquisition, though never

publicly recorded, was whispered to have been the result of a particularly lopsided inheritance dispute, in which several rival claimants withdrew without contest after brief, private audiences with him. Under his management, the Isle achieved its present state: its harbor concealed, its staff loyal through a combination of indulgence and terror, its subterranean network expanded to a scale that rivals the visible mansion above.

Today, the Isle's history is not taught in any school, its name not printed on any legitimate chart. Yet among a certain class of men — and a few women — it is spoken of with a mixture of awe and appetite, as one might speak of a rare vintage or a lost city of gold: a place where isolation is absolute, appetites are unfettered, and the only law is that written by the host in the moment of his desire.

The Isle itself, as any cartographer fortunate enough to have glimpsed it from the sea would note, lies several leagues from the nearest charted land, set adrift in a collar of deep water so dark that even at midday it resembles an inkblot spilled across the ocean's page. It rises from the sea like the exposed crown of a drowned citadel, its cliffs sheer and streaked with mineral stains — ochres, verdigris, and the dull mauve of iron seepage — so that the rock face seems to bleed in several colors at once.

Approach is possible only on the leeward side, where a narrow inlet curves into a concealed harbor no more than two fathoms wide. The entrance is flanked by promontories cut to knife-edges by the wind, and in certain tides the waves pass between them with such force that the resulting spume forms a temporary curtain, veiling the dock entirely from distant eyes. This single mooring is the Isle's only concession to the outside world; all other faces fall in sheer drops to the churning sea.

The mansion — though such a word does it an injustice, for it is less a dwelling than a hybrid of fortress, temple, and stage — crowns the highest point of the rock. Its foundations bite into the cliff itself, the stone quarried from the Isle's own marrow, so that its color matches the surrounding heights, rendering it invisible from afar except when the sun catches the windows in a sudden blaze. The edifice is a sprawling irregularity: wings added in successive epochs of depravity, each in a different architectural idiom, yet all unified by the black glaze that coats their facades, a treatment that at once preserves the stone and lends it the aspect of having been perpetually wet.

From the air — not that any craft has dared approach within such proximity — one would see the plan resolve into a tripartite symmetry: a central keep, flanked by two long galleries, each ending in a tower. The central keep houses the salons, dining halls, and what the Curator calls, with mock ecclesiastical gravity, the “Chamber of Assembly.” The east gallery is devoted entirely to accommodation, though to call them “bedchambers” would be to omit the more particular functions for which they have been appointed. The west gallery contains the libraries, music rooms, and various collections — yet these, too, conceal their ulterior purposes behind the veneer of cultivated leisure.

Beneath the visible structure lies the Isle’s true anatomy. A network of corridors and chambers has been excavated from the rock itself, extending downward in four levels, each more sequestered than the last. The uppermost sublevel contains the kitchens, pantries, and staff quarters, though these are arranged so that no servant need ever pass into the sightline of a guest unless summoned. The second level is a complex of “private theaters” — narrow chambers lined with plush banquettes, each terminating in a curtained alcove, the functions of which are left to the imagination until the curtain is drawn. The third level is given over to the prisons, if such a modest term can be applied to a facility whose cells vary from the monastic austerity of bare stone and iron rings to the ornate barbarity of velvet-lined cages suspended from the ceiling.

The lowest level — accessible only through a series of locks requiring both a key and a sequence of hidden levers — is known to its proprietors simply as *the Reservoir*. Its purpose is neither wholly penal nor wholly recreational, but a synthesis of both: an immense, vaulted hall whose floor is a shallow pool of brackish water, fed by a fissure in the cliff. Around its circumference run narrow ledges, punctuated by alcoves from which one may observe, unseen, whatever tableau unfolds below. Here the Isle’s isolation is most complete; here, the noise of the sea merges with the murmurs of its entertainments, so that no sound escapes to the open air.

The surrounding grounds are no less calculated. The narrow band of arable land atop the cliff is cultivated in formal gardens whose labyrinthine hedges, when seen from above, resolve into obscene hieroglyphs comprehensible only to the initiated. Interspersed among the hedges are pavilions, each an architectural curiosity in its own right: one a perfect octagon with a domed roof of green glass, another an open colonnade whose entablature bears

reliefs so explicit that, at a glance, they could be mistaken for mythological scenes until their particulars resolve in the eye.

Every aspect of the Isle’s design and evolution — from its perilous harbor to its subterranean vaults — speaks to a single principle: the complete sequestration of its dramas from the judgment of the outside world. Not even the smoke from its chimneys is permitted to drift free; a system of underground flues disperses it into the cliff face, where it escapes in wisps too faint to draw notice.

Thus the Isle stands, not merely apart from the world but defiantly outside its moral and political jurisdictions — a black monument to the belief that any appetite, if given the proper architecture, may be indulged without consequence.

III. The Voyage to the Isle

The afternoon lay upon the city like the touch of an indolent courtesan — warm, scented, and faintly oppressive. The sun, bloated with its own splendor, poured molten light over the rooftops, turning each chimney to a column of gold and each pane of glass to a miniature conflagration. A breeze, languid as a sigh, drifted through the streets, carrying with it the mingled perfumes of overripe fruit from the market stalls, the acrid tang of horse-sweat from the carriage ranks, and — for those who knew how to discern it — the subtler scent of intrigue brewing in shaded rooms.

In such an atmosphere, where the air itself seemed drunk on promise and faintly tinged with menace, the Magnate beckoned the Youth to a secluded courtyard. Here, squatting like a colossal beetle, was the most bizarre conveyance the Youth had ever beheld — though he would sooner have bitten through his own tongue than admit ignorance. Imagine, if you will, a mechanical dragonfly stripped of all elegance and given instead the bulk of a fortress turret; its body was a black, riveted carapace, swelling at the middle to accommodate its passengers, and tapering fore and aft into points bristling with lamps and antennae like the feelers of some unnatural insect.

Above this monstrous hull, fixed to a central mast, revolved a pair of vast, flat scythes of polished metal — so long that their tips described a blurred halo in the air, as if the creature were crowned with a spinning nimbus of steel. These blades — if such they may be called — threshed the air with a sound midway between a hurricane’s roar and the churning of a thousand flails in a barnyard, producing a constant downward gale that flattened the weeds in the courtyard and whipped at the Youth’s coattails. At the rear protruded a smaller whirling fan, its ceaseless gyrations serving — so the Magnate claimed — to keep the machine from pirouetting itself into oblivion.

The entire contrivance sat upon a quartet of spindly, curved stilts, giving it the look of a monstrous waterfowl resting in a marsh. At intervals, these legs quivered as the machine’s hidden organs — a labyrinth of pistons, gears, and shrieking turbines — shuddered into greater life. The smell it exhaled was an alchemy of hot oil, scorched metal, and some invisible fuel whose pungency seemed to invade the back of the throat.

The Magnate, of course, treated this infernal insect as a familiar steed. He strode forward, his great belly leading the way, and clambered into the glass-fronted capsule with the ease of one mounting a favorite mare. The Youth, affecting the feigned serenity of a boy for whom every novelty is merely a

footnote to established wisdom, followed — though the tightening of his jaw betrayed the small rebellions of his composure.

The Curator was already within, seated in a posture of proprietary ease, his long fingers draped over his knees like the claws of a resting bird of prey. A brief nod passed between him and the Magnate — the silent acknowledgment of two merchants meeting over a shipment neither intended to declare to customs. The doors closed with a hiss like a serpent drawing breath. The air inside was warmer still, tinged with the metallic tang of the vessel's workings and the faint, sour musk of upholstery long used for confidential journeys. With a lurch that pressed their bodies into the seats, the mechanical insect arose, not by leaping but by a slow, implacable ascension, the ground sinking away until the city became a quilt of rooftops and streets, stitched with the glinting thread of canals and rivers.

Even from this height, the Isle was yet invisible, concealed beyond the haze where the horizon melted into the sky. The Magnate, settling deeper into his seat, turned toward the Youth with the indulgent expression of a man about to explain a game whose outcome he has already arranged. The Curator, for his part, smiled faintly, as though savoring a private jest.

It was in that enclosed, vibrating capsule — suspended between the familiar vices of the city and the uncharted excesses of the Isle — that the stage was set for their first philosophical exchange, one in which the Magnate and the Curator would speak not to persuade but to prepare, and the Youth would listen not to learn but to delay the hour when his denials would fail him.

The Magnate, once installed in his seat, reclined with the satisfaction of a man certain that every cushion in the world was designed for his comfort. The great blades above beat the air into submission, ruffling the thin golden ramparts of his hair into what he seemed to regard as a coronation.

"You'll like the Isle," he declared, grinning as though he were offering the Youth a rare delicacy. "It's like a steak so perfect you don't even need sauce. Sauce is the law — the rules, the boring stuff. The Isle doesn't need any of that. People have always said it's the best. The finest. All Steak. No Sauce. Prime cut. Not… uh… not like the stuff you get at chain places."

The Youth's lips thinned, as though he had tasted something slightly rancid. He answered with the clipped assurance of a man reciting from a well-rehearsed internal anthology of refutations:

“If one insisted on the metaphor, then the law was not a decorative sauce but the plate itself — without it, the steak could not be presented at all, nor would the tablecloth remain unstained. Cicero, in *De Legibus*, makes precisely this point: remove the plate, and you remove the meal.”

The Magnate gave a derisive snort, beginning to form a rebuttal — “Yeah, well, Cicero never had my steak guy—” — but the Curator’s voice slid in like a stiletto between ribs: low, urbane, deliberate.

“Law is a veil over a courtesan’s face,” he murmured, “a lacework that adds charm only until desire insists on seeing the flesh beneath. One may admire the veil… but only until the hand grows restless.” There was no hurry in his speech, no anxiety that the Youth might object; he spoke like a man who knew interruptions were only preludes to consent.

“Yes! Exactly!” The Magnate slapped his thigh, clearly delighted, though it was doubtful he had grasped the Curator’s imagery. “You brush it aside. Like when you pull the wrapper off a burger. The wrapper’s the law — the burger’s the good part. You don’t… you know… eat the wrapper.”

The Youth inhaled through his nose, a little more sharply this time. “You have misunderstood the law’s nature,” he quickly exhaled. “The law is no wrapper, no veil, no unnecessary contrivance. It is necessary to stop men from debasing themselves in the most vile, the most libertine, the most licentious of acts. For without law, we will have chaos. Life will be nasty, brutish, and short. Hobbes understood this, Augustine too: what you say would be true if men were angels — but men are fallen. Devils who need the law to stop us from indulging in the hamburger lest we become engorged with the deadly sin of gluttony.”

“To deny this,” the Youth exhaustingly and smugly concluded, “is to fall for relativism, the intellectual disease of our age.”

The Magnate huffed a disapproving grunt, but the Curator smiled at this, a slow and almost paternal smile. “Meat rots whether wrapped or not,” he slyly remarked. “Virtue is subject to the same entropy. Law might slow the decay, but it cannot prevent the transformation of chastity into vice — it can only delay the feast.” His gaze drifted to the Magnate, and he added, as though it were a compliment, “Some palates prefer their meat fresh; others prefer it after the juices have… matured.”

The Magnate grunted again, this time with a faint leer. “Why would we want rotten meat? We want the best stuff. The good stuff. The meat.” He shifted

forward, emboldened by the Curator's tone. "See? Eating is the whole point. It's the good thing. We need law, sure — but only to stop the dumb people. The idiots. The rubes. The ones with bad genes from ruining our fun. We're the best. Where we're going, we don't need law."

The Curator inclined his head, as though to acknowledge a crude truth expressed crudely. "Indeed. And our young companion here"—he let his gaze rest on the Youth long enough to make the boy shift in his seat—"fears that truth enough to hide behind syllogism — the architecture of reason erected as a wall against the siege of appetite. A noble fortification… but a fortification all the same."

The Youth, suddenly more rigid, protested: "Reason is the means by which passions are governed, not denied. Aristotle—" But the beat of the blades above seemed to smudge the precision from his words.

The Magnate leaned forward, lip curling. "Speak up, kid. Or is the burger too much for you already?"

The Curator laughed — not a loud laugh, but one so precisely measured it left the Youth unsure whether it was mockery or indulgence. He looked away, fixing his eyes on the smudge of darkness now taking form at the horizon.

The Youth, clearing his throat, tried to change the subject. "What are we doing on this Isle, anyway?"

The Magnate did not hesitate. "Grabbin' pussy," he said flatly, as if announcing the day's weather.

The Youth recoiled as though slapped, his back stiffening against the seat. "Sir," he began, his voice pitched between outrage and disbelief, "that is a vile and wholly uncharitable way of describing—" He stopped, searching for an escape hatch in the sentence. "—of describing the mutual exchange of… of respect and admiration between the sexes, which, in its highest form, is an allegory for the harmony of the polis."

He folded his arms, visibly trying to construct a moral bastion out of this new metaphor. "Yes," he added, as though convincing himself, "what you crudely expressed is in truth nothing more than the cultivation of civic friendship, the tending of the garden of society — pruning, shaping, guiding it toward the Good."

The Curator's guffaw broke from him in a single rich peel, rolling into a softer chuckle as he leaned back. "Ah, my dear boy," he said, "what the Magnate

describes in his… admirably direct idiom is merely the unmediated apprehension of beauty — the sovereign impulse to claim, in one decisive gesture, the essence of that which stirs the senses. It is the apotheosis of immediacy, the triumph of tactile prerogative over the slow bankruptcy of courtship. In short: the assertion of proprietorship by contact, an act older than chivalry and unspoiled by the hypocrisies of sentiment.”

The Magnate blinked, a slow smile dawning as though he sensed the Curator had agreed with him, albeit in an unfamiliar dialect. The Youth, for his part, only frowned, uncertain whether he had just been supported or insulted.

The Curator’s words seemed to hang in the air long after they had been spoken, swirling with the mechanical thrum of the blades, mingling with the warm metallic tang in the cabin. Outside, the haze that had cloaked the horizon began to loosen, as though the day itself were peeling back its veil.

“There,” the Curator murmured, tilting his chin toward a darkness swelling from the seam of sea and sky.

At first it appeared only as a jagged punctuation against the sunlit emptiness — the faint silhouette of cliffs rising like black teeth from the water’s mouth. But as they approached, the form took on a dreadful coherence: a crown of rock encircling a hidden hollow, its sheer faces streaked with mineral veins in colors no cartographer would dare paint. The wind shifted, carrying with it a scent that was neither salt nor stone but something earthier, almost sweet, like the exhalation of a cellar long sealed.

The Magnate grunted in satisfaction, as though the very sight of it had confirmed some private boast. The Youth, pressed to the glass, wore the tight-lipped expression of a man trying to determine whether he beheld a fortress or a ruin — and hoping for the former.

The Curator leaned slightly toward him, his voice dropping into a register that was almost confidential. “The Isle greets few visitors. Fewer still depart with their illusions intact. It has a way of… impressing itself upon the mind.”

Below, the cliffs broke for a narrow inlet — a wound in the rock that seemed to drink the sea into its hidden belly. There, tucked into shadow, lay the landing terrace: a flat platform of blackened stone, its surface polished to an unnatural sheen, the kind that speaks not of weathering but of careful, deliberate use. Beyond it, the mansion rose in fragments — here a tower, there a gabled roof — half-hidden among terraces and gardens, all bound

together by the black-glazed walls that caught the dying sun in blood-red streaks.

As the craft descended, the sound of the rotors pressed down on the place like an executioner’s drum. The Youth’s eyes followed the gardens, tracing their serpentine hedges until he realized they formed patterns too intricate, too deliberate to be ornamental. The Magnate was already craning forward in his seat, eager, almost boyish in his anticipation. The Curator merely smiled, his gaze fixed on the terrace below, as though seeing not stone and mortar but a stage prepared for an entertainment only he could have scripted.

III. Behold, the Isle

The mechanical insect touched down upon the terrace with a slow, deliberate shudder, as though reluctant to part with the air it had conquered. The great blades above slackened their furious whirl into a lazy rotation, each pass of the steel scythes sending a last perfumed gust of hot oil and scorched metal across the stone.

When the cabin door yawned open, the heat struck them first — not the clean, briny heat of open sea, but a heavier, more private warmth, like the air inside a hothouse left sealed too long. It carried with it a faint chorus of scents that defied easy parsing: damp stone, some obscure floral sweetness, and a darker, animal undertone that the Youth immediately chose not to name.

The Magnate was the first to descend, his gait more a forward roll than a step, each footfall landing with the assurance of a man certain the ground exists solely to support him. His eyes swept the terrace greedily, as though searching for some feature that would confirm the Isle’s reputation in his own vulgar terms.

The Youth followed, his polished shoes making cautious contact with the black stone. He looked about with the circumspect reserve of a man trying to take the measure of a place without appearing to do so, but there was a stiffness to his posture that betrayed a faint disquiet — an unacknowledged awareness that they had crossed into a jurisdiction where the law was not merely absent, but alien.

The Curator emerged last, stepping down with the feline assurance of a man who knows the terrain as well as his own body. A pair of attendants in dark livery materialized at his sides — silent, unsmiling, each holding a silver-headed cane they did not appear to need for walking.

“My friends,” the Curator said, his voice carrying without raising, “welcome. The Isle has been expecting you.”

His eyes moved first to the Magnate, and in that glance there was a private understanding, as if one veteran of a certain profession were greeting another. To the Youth, however, he offered a different sort of gaze — longer, more appraising, the way a collector might look upon a new specimen: noting not merely its beauty or flaw, but how it might be arranged to advantage in the cabinet.

The attendants bowed fractionally, then fell in behind as the Curator turned toward a stairway that descended from the terrace to a shadowed arcade below. The stone beneath their feet was so polished it seemed to drink their reflections whole; the air grew cooler as they passed under the first arch, and the sea's voice faded until it was replaced by a more intimate sound — the faint, rhythmic trickle of unseen water, punctuated now and then by a distant door closing.

The Magnate chuckled low in his throat. "Nice setup," he muttered, half to himself. "Feels… private."

The Curator's mouth curved into that small, knowing smile again. "Privacy is the Isle's least precious commodity. You will find, in due time, that it traffics in rarities of a far more… personal kind."

The Youth's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Somewhere deeper in the building, a sound like a sigh drifted down the corridor toward them — not the sigh of the wind, but of a human breath, heavy with something that might have been longing or resignation.

"Come," the Curator said. "The first chamber awaits."

"The first chamber?" the Youth inquired. "To what does that refer?"

The Youth's question was left unanswered as both the Curator and the Youth struggled to keep up with the Magnate's excitedly rapid promenade into the mansion.

The stairway disgorged them into a vaulted arcade, its arches supported by columns of black-veined marble that seemed to have been quarried from the Isle's own spine. The stone was cool to the touch, almost damp, as though it still remembered the ocean's pressure from which it had been wrenched. Each arch framed a vista — to the left, the terraced gardens with their serpentine hedges; to the right, the sheer drop of the cliff, where the sea pressed itself against the rock with the slow insistence of a siege.

They crossed into the grand vestibule, a chamber whose proportions were subtly unsettling: neither square nor rectangular, but a kind of elongated hexagon that made the eye uncertain of its true depth. The ceiling soared into shadow, from which hung a chandelier that was less a fixture than a frozen cascade — hundreds of glass pendants, each twisted into a form that might have been botanical or anatomical, their tips tinted the deep red of congealed wine.

The walls were clad in black-lacquered panels, their surfaces interrupted by tall mirrors in gilt frames. These mirrors reflected not just the figures of the newcomers but also the room's light in such a way that shadows seemed to detach from their owners and linger independently, as if unwilling to follow too closely.

From the vestibule, a sequence of corridors extended like the arms of a labyrinth. The first ran toward the east wing, lined with niches in which stood statues of figures from myth — though here the gods and heroes appeared in states of abasement rather than triumph, their features finely rendered in expressions of humiliation, desire, or both. The second corridor, leading west, was hung with a series of enormous canvases, each depicting an episode from the Isle's own dark genealogy.

The floors throughout were of inlaid wood, the pattern a repetition of interlocking circles that seemed at first ornamental, then slightly obscene once the pattern's implication revealed itself to the more attentive mind. In places, the boards had been so polished by passing feet that they reflected the light like a pool's surface, doubling the depth of the corridors in a way that made distance difficult to judge.

At intervals along their passage, they passed closed doors — each with a heavy bronze handle shaped in some suggestive form: a clasping hand, a coiled serpent, a pair of lips half-parted. Some doors bore locks with multiple keyholes; others had none at all, as if the contents required no physical barrier, only the understanding that entry would not be wise.

The Curator spoke sparingly, offering only the occasional oblique comment — "This room rewards patience," or "That hall is best visited after dark" — in a tone that made it impossible to tell whether he meant to intrigue or warn. The Magnate's eyes roved greedily over each detail, as if inventorying the place for future use. The Youth kept his gaze forward, save for one involuntary glance at a fresco on the ceiling of the west gallery, where a cluster of angels appeared to be restraining one of their own with silken cords.

At last, the Curator paused before a double door taller than three men, its surface carved with a relief of two intertwined figures whose identities were left deliberately ambiguous — not quite man and woman, not quite captor and captive, the tension between them suspended in eternal negotiation.

"This," he said, producing from his pocket a key the color of aged bone, "is where our evening begins."

IV. The Chamber of Dominion

The double doors swung open with a groan like some ancient vault, and the air that emerged from within was warmer, closer, carrying the faint perfume of sweat, silk, and something coppery that lingered at the edge of taste.

The chamber was arranged as though for a trial, if trials were conducted in house of ill repute. A raised dais stood at one end, upon which a young woman knelt, her wrists bound behind her in silken cords dyed the same red as her lips. The dais was surrounded by low benches, all upholstered in crimson velvet worn smooth in the places where countless hands had rested.

The Magnate moved forward at once, shedding his coat to reveal rolls of excess girth like a preposterous athlete entering a boxing ring. He circled the dais, his steps slow, his eyes roving with a proprietor’s entitlement. When the woman flinched from his touch, he laughed — a short, guttural sound — and leaned in to whisper something that made her jaw tighten.

The Curator lingered in the doorway, drawing a slender cigar from a silver case. He cut the tip with a deliberate snip, set it to a flame, and exhaled a first ribbon of smoke that curled upward toward the ceiling’s fresco — a tableau of cherubs, their faces strangely twisted into grimaces that could have been ecstasy or pain.

The Youth hesitated at the threshold, then stepped inside with a jerky resolve, his eyes darting from the Magnate’s hands to the bound figure on the dais. “This is—” he began, faltering. “This is… a performance. Yes, a theatrical tableau. The cords are props, the distress feigned.”

The Curator turned toward him with that slight, feline smile. “Is that what you see?”

“It must be,” the Youth insisted, his voice gaining brittle firmness. “For otherwise this would be an outrage against her natural rights.”

“Ah,” the Curator said softly, as though tasting the words. “Natural rights. Those gifts from the divine, uncorrupted by human institutions?”

“Yes,” the Youth said, almost defiantly. “God endows them, and the law — proper, moral law — enforces them. Without law, these rights are forfeit to the strong.”

The Curator took another slow draw on his cigar. “So these rights exist independently of man’s decrees… yet depend for their existence on the very

decrees you earlier told me are the root of all morality. Curious, is it not? That a thing eternal should require your legislature's benediction to keep breathing."

"That's not—" The Youth began, but his voice wavered. "It is the role of the state to safeguard what God has given."

"Does the state safeguard all that God has given?" The Curator gestured idly toward the dais, where the Magnate was now tilting the woman's chin up with two thick fingers, speaking to her in a low, proprietary murmur. "What if God has given one man strength, another beauty, a third appetite? Is the state to intervene each time one gift trespasses upon another?"

The Youth's gaze flickered back to the scene. His lips parted, then pressed shut again. "This is not the same. This is coercion."

The Curator smiled faintly. "Coercion… or the exercise of a superior's prerogative? You see abuse; he sees the claiming of what is within his grasp. Which of you is right?"

"I—" the Youth began, then stopped, flustered. "She has rights."

"Which he denies, here and now, without consequence. Do they still exist?"

The Youth looked away, toward the fresco, as though the painted cherubs might arbitrate the point. "They exist in God's eyes."

"Then perhaps you should pray," the Curator murmured, exhaling smoke that drifted between them like a question mark.

On the dais, the Magnate laughed again, louder this time, the sound filling the chamber. The woman did not speak, but her eyes — level and steady — were fixed not on her captor, but on the Youth, as though she were curious how long he would stand there telling himself stories.

The Magnate's hands roamed now without even the pretense of ceremony, pawing at the bound figure before him as though she were some crude cut of meat at a butcher's counter, to be prodded, squeezed, and thumped for quality. His fingers, short and thick as parsnips left too long in the soil, pressed into her flesh until the pale skin bloomed with red marks in the shape of his grip. Every so often he would pause in his groping, not from any sense of delicacy, but to grunt a few words — blunt, porcine syllables — into her ear, the breath from his mouth hot and damp as a dog's tongue. When she winced, he seemed to take it as proof of her value, nodding to himself like a tradesman who has found a rare flaw to exploit in a bargaining session.

The Youth stood a few paces away, shoulders tight, his whole frame straining backward as though proximity alone might implicate him. His lips twitched at the corners, torn between a grimace and a forced smile; his voice, when he spoke, came out in thin, nasal bursts, as if each sentence were a rope bridge he had to run across before it collapsed under him. “It’s… symbolic,” he blurted, the words escaping too quickly, as though afraid of their own reception. “A dramatization of man’s dominion over the temptations of the flesh…” His eyes darted anywhere but the scene before him, finding sudden fascination in the molding on the ceiling or the pattern in the velvet benches.

The Curator’s eyebrow rose, but his voice remained smooth. “Ah. So the violation you see before you is, in truth, a parable of restraint? How very charitable of you.” He exhaled a slow plume of smoke, letting it curl upward before continuing. “But tell me — if it *were* genuine, if her will *were* overborne by his—why should that be an outrage to you? You’ve already admitted that power, in all its forms, is God-given. And does not the lion, stronger than the lamb, enact the law of nature when it feeds?”

“That’s—” the Youth began, faltering. His voice cracked halfway through the word, making it sound like a boy’s first objection to an unjust bedtime. His eyes darted back to the woman — now bent slightly forward under the Magnate’s insistent grip, her hair caught in his stubby fingers like a skein of silk in a clumsy loom. “That’s not the same. We are not beasts.”

“Are we not?” the Curator said, leaning a fraction closer, his voice dropping as if to confide a secret. “Strip away the costumes of civilization — the powdered wigs, the robes, the statutes — and what remains? Appetite.”

The Magnate, now emboldened by the girl’s restrained posture, leaned against her with the full, careless weight of a man used to furniture that bears his bulk without protest. His belly — a vast, soft promontory — pressed into her back, making her flinch involuntarily, which drew from him a pleased snort.

The Youth’s cheeks flamed, his tone growing shrill. “That’s exactly why we need law — to protect the weak!” The pitch of his voice made the words sound almost like a plea for rescue, not a pronouncement of principle.

“Protect them from what they are too weak to resist?” The Curator’s tone was almost tender. “Rights are nothing but the indulgence of the strong toward the weak, rescindable at whim.”

The Magnate barked a laugh at that, not from agreement so much as from some private joke that had no punchline. He punctuated the noise with a slap — an ugly, meaty sound — that made the woman's head jerk sideways.

The Youth flinched as though the blow had landed on his own cheek. "This is… performance," he repeated, his voice fraying, the last word trailing upward like a question. "A simulation meant to… to provoke discourse about…" But whatever noble theme he intended to summon deserted him before it reached his lips.

The Curator smiled faintly, savoring the ash on his tongue. "Of course. And in the meantime, the lesson you are learning is a simple one: what is done cannot be undone, and what is permitted once will be repeated until it becomes the custom."

The Magnate grinned over his shoulder, puffed up with the sense that the conversation, though mostly incomprehensible to him, was going in his favor. "Kid's coming around," he said, shifting his weight so that his bulk pressed the bound figure lower still.

The Youth shook his head vehemently, though the motion lacked conviction. "I am not," he said, but his voice was quieter now, and his eyes remained fixed not on the woman, but on the distant, neutral geometry of the tiled floor.

The Magnate's attentions had now grown uglier in their vigor. He gripped the woman by the jaw with his stubby fingers, forcing her head up and back, his thumb pressing hard enough into her cheek to leave a white indent in the skin. When she tried to turn away, he pulled harder, his bulk looming over her like an overfed idol leaning from its pedestal to crush a supplicant.

The Youth half-stepped forward, half-stepped back, his hands flinching toward her and then away as though some invisible cord tethered him in indecision. "This… this is excessive," he stammered. "If this were—if this *were* real—it would be a crime! An abrogation of her rights! A—" His voice cracked, snapping the word in two.

The Curator, lounging with one ankle crossed over the other, tapped ash into a shallow gilt dish. "A crime? By whose statute?"

"The statute of… of morality!" the Youth blurted, his voice pitching high with the effort to sound authoritative. "The moral law! The law of God!"

“Ah, so not the code of man after all,” the Curator said smoothly, “but the one written on some heavenly tablet.” He leaned forward slightly, his eyes narrowing in the indulgent manner of a tutor coaxing a pupil toward a lesson that will undo him. “Tell me, if your God so despises this act, why does He not stay the Magnate’s hand? Does the Almighty lack the strength, or the will?”

The Youth’s mouth opened, closed, opened again. “God allows evil to test the righteous,” he said finally, the words spilling out with the desperation of a drowning man grabbing driftwood.

The Magnate laughed, a coarse barking sound. “Guess you’re the one being tested, kid!” he jeered, his free hand now gripping a fistful of the woman’s dress and wrenching it upward. The fabric tore with a long, slow rip, like parchment yielding to damp fingers.

The Youth’s breath caught, his face blanching. “She’s… she’s consenting in spirit,” he declared wildly, though his voice trembled. “Yes—she must be! This is theater—a consensual—”

The Curator’s smoke-wreathed chuckle cut him off. “You imagine that consent is some incorruptible jewel, yet it is as malleable as wax beneath a warmer hand. I tell you: what you call ‘rights’ are only the conventions of peace between equals, abandoned the moment inequality asserts itself. Here”—he gestured lazily toward the Magnate—“is inequality in its most perfect form: strength married to appetite.”

“That’s barbarism!” the Youth cried, his voice shrill. “Without rights, we have nothing!”

“Without rights,” the Curator said, his tone as patient as if explaining a recipe, “you have the truth of the human condition. With them, you have a polite lie. You prefer the lie because it flatters your vanity and spares you the sight of your own fragility. But lies are fragile things. Watch—”

And here the Magnate, as if on cue, gave a brutal shove that sent the woman sprawling forward against the dais, her bound arms twisted awkwardly behind her. He loomed over her, breathing hard, his broad back blotting out the frescoed cherubs overhead.

The Youth gasped, an unmanly, high-pitched sound, and clutched at the bench beside him. “This is monstrous!” he squeaked, yet his feet did not move toward her.

The Curator’s smile deepened, faint but triumphant. “Monstrous, yes. But tell me—will you stop it? Or will you watch, and call it a test from God, and comfort yourself with the thought that she consents in spirit? You see, my young friend, you are already halfway to my philosophy. You simply lack the courage to name it.”

The Magnate, oblivious to the exchange, grinned over his shoulder. “Told you the kid’s coming around.”

The Youth shook his head, a jerky, petulant motion. “I am *not*—” But his eyes, traitorous in their confusion, could not settle on either the woman or the man looming over her.

V. The Chamber of the Flesh

After a few minutes of awkward silence on the part of the befuddled Youth and the voyeuristic Curator, though no less than full-throated grunting, yelling, moaning and groaning on the part of the Magnate and his victim the disturbing play ceased. The Magnate stood up, redressed his garments and disappeared into a small doorway on the other side of the room from where the three men entered.

“Come,” the Curator said with a smirk, “we have another chamber to which we must attend.”

The Youth silently followed the Curator through the same double doors through which they entered and back into the hall. The curator slowly and leisurely walked the other end of the annex while slowly puffing on his cigar, as the Youth awkwardly and nervously ambled through the hall, jumping at his every foot step. They continued like this until they came across two large, gilded doors which the Curator opened, revealing the second chamber.

The second chamber opened not like a hall of judgment but like the interior of a lung — damp, close, and heavy with breath. The air was a languid soup of fragrances: bruised jasmine petals fermenting in shallow brass basins; honeyed wine spilling from upturned goblets to form sluggish amber rivulets that clung stubbornly to the grain of the wood; and beneath it all, the unmistakable musk of flesh that had been warmed and worked until it yielded every perfume its pores could muster.

The walls, if they could be called that, were shrouded in hangings of deep carmine, each so thick with embroidery that the patterns seemed to writhe in the torchlight: satyrs locked in perpetual pursuit of nymphs, their gold-thread limbs frozen an instant before capture or embrace. There was no dais here — no throne for a victor — but instead a sunken floor, as though the room itself bowed inward to receive what would unfold within it.

Around this pit of indulgence, the furnishings stood at respectful distance, like courtiers keeping back from the king’s bed. Low couches, their cushions bursting with indolent feathers, waited for the weary or the sated. Small side tables bore dishes of sugared fruits so overripe they had begun to collapse under their own sweetness, their skins splitting to reveal interiors glistening and treacherous. Candles, some little more than molten stubs, guttered in elaborate holders shaped into entwined figures whose polished bronze surfaces gleamed with a suggestion of sweat.

Above all, there was heat — not the brisk, bracing heat of exertion but the slow, smothering warmth that presses the skin into compliance and makes every garment, however fine, feel like an intrusion. It was a species of heat in which chastity could not survive long without rotting into some more pungent virtue.

The Magnate stepped into this place through a small port on the other end of the chamber as one steps into a bath drawn for his exclusive pleasure, inhaling deeply, his thick chest with its lipidoses swelling and bouncing beneath the open front of his shirt. The Curator surveyed the space at a measured pace, taking in the room as a connoisseur surveys a gallery, his expression neither approving nor disapproving, but quietly anticipating. The Youth lingered at the threshold, eyes darting from the carmine walls to the sunken pit, as though suspecting some trap but unwilling to name it.

The Magnate proceeded to consecrate the room with carnal sauces as multitudes of licentiously adorned captive maidens entered the pit alongside him. He practiced a kind of sacerdotal corporeal gourmandise. Goblets, once upright, now lay on their sides like fainting courtiers; wine issued from them in slow arterial threads, seeking the seams of the floor with missionary patience. He decanted the bottles into himself and himself into the upholstery, baptizing cushions in a succession of vintages. A tureen—once innocent of its destiny—received his wrists to the hilt in a gesture half ablution, half looting; when he withdrew, the broth clung to him like the gratitude of lesser men.

Fruit, selected for ripeness with the seriousness of a librarian, failed spectacularly under his attentions. Pears parted along their hips with a sigh; figs confessed; a pomegranate underwent public penance, strewing rubies across the lacquer like a reliquary overturned. Custards went to pieces. Eclairs expired with a theological squeak. He found uses for honey the apiarist had not intended and, with the carefree piety of a child in a reliquary, anointed his person with oils meant for the lamps. The air grew glossy. Everything shone, then slumped.

There were other effusions—the democratic kind that attend any body in heat and triumph. His moist, merciless laughter tossed off pearls of saliva that beaded on the bronze like ornament; sweat organized itself into tributaries, mapping empire across his shirt; a cough produced a brief benediction of aerosol that the candles caught and blushed at. He dabbed at his face with a napkin already promoted beyond its competence, then pressed it into service as a flag of victory over a platter of collapsing

syllabub. Perfume, meat steam, and the low animal tang of effort braided themselves into a single, ecclesiastically heavy incense.

It soon became evident that the evening had entered its condimentary phase. The Magnate, a one-man brigade de cuisine now shirtless, worked the room like a saucier gone doctrinal. Emitting every multitude of unculinary condiments from both his and the maidens' figures which nature would allow him to extract.

First came the mustards. There was the bellicose stadium yellow—bright as a herald's trumpet—laid in jubilant slashes across linen that had not asked for history. Then Dijon, urbane and insinuating, appeared in diplomatic dollops along the edge of a room-sized platter, where it proceeded to annex neighboring territories by capillary action. Lastly the whole-grain, a buckshot of seeds bursting under thumb, stippled cuffs and cushions with the indiscretions of a hunter returning triumphantly from the pantry. Each had its personality: the yellow bragged, the Dijon persuaded, the grain confessed.

To these were yoked the beers: not poured so much as encouraged to overachieve. Foam came on like a coup—an uprising of pale citizens toppling the amber government below—before sliding down glass and wrist in industrious laces. A malt glaze developed wherever the overflow met heat: a sticky treaty binding sleeve to skin, coaster to table, hand to whatever it presumed to govern. Somewhere a bottle found itself inverted over an empty bowl and continued to argue its case long after reason had left the chamber.

The wines followed in triumphal procession. Austere claret drafted proclamations down the damask—serious, vertical, convinced of its own jurisprudence—while rosé behaved like a gossip column: blushes, whispers, little scandals spreading in rings. White arrived as beurre blanc aspirations and citrus reductions on the drift, recruiting whatever surface would listen; ruby port authored footnotes in the margins of the carpet, annotations sticky with authority. Where two vintages met they did not mingle so much as parley, establishing borders that would be disputed every time a foot passed.

On a sideboard, gravies—thick with ambition—attempted a constitutional monarchy over potatoes and failed, abdicating in glossy sluices down chair legs. Aioli that began the night a coherent republic seceded into factions under heat, its emulsion parting into oily provinces and exiled garlic. Demi-glace lacquered a platter to a satyr's shin with museum-grade permanence; honey annexed everything slow enough to be conquered. The room's

temperature rose and with it the sauces' political will: what had been mere condiments became policy, then custom, then stain.

The Magnate, delighted, promoted napkins to treaties and then violated them; he ratified a spoon into a paintbrush and proceeded to legislate on fleshy upholstery. Each splash arrived with tasting notes none had requested—vinegar forethought, mustard bravado, beer's populist foam, wine's aristocratic afterword—until the chamber smelled not of supper but of history conducted at a sprint.

As this incongruously moist performance began to unfold, the Curator lit a fresh cigar and installed himself as chief witness and choirmaster of the nose, exhaling skeins of blue that dignified the scene the way a frame flatters the indecency it surrounds. The Youth arranged his face into a syllabus—first the docent's smile of allegory, then the parishioner's flinch at blasphemy, then a brisk, judicial blinking that declared any unseemly evidence inadmissible.

"Remarkable stagecraft!" he announced too brightly to hide his apprehension. "Plainly an actor. An elaborate morality play. The lesson is chastity."

"Chastity?" the Curator tasted the word. "In a room where even the candles are sweating through their collars?"

"It is not him," the Youth insisted, voice thinning to wire. "The Magnate is a good man. Fidelity's friend. That is clearly an actor grotesquely dressed up to superficially appear as the Magnate. A play, it is, merely fiction."

"Then let us speak of chastity," the Curator replied, smiling through smoke, "and whether a lock deserves praise when every hand in the house keeps a key."

The Youth drew himself up, though the gesture looked defensive rather than noble. "Chastity is a virtue," he said crisply, "an ordering of the passions to right reason. It is not absence but mastery; not a door locked from fear, but a threshold guarded by will."

"Then mastery implies a master," the Curator replied, pleasantly. "And the master—reason, you say—serves whom? The soul? God? Or the pleasing fiction you keep of yourself? I submit that chastity is a stage costume: splendid in lamplight, fragile in rain. It requires spectators, and dissolves the moment the theater floods.

A sound from the pit—something between a victory whoop and a furniture complaint—cut across the room. The Youth's mouth tightened; he refused to look.

"Adultery is simple," he said, louder than necessary. "A betrayal. A perjury against vows. It is wrong because fidelity is right."

"Very elegant," the Curator nodded, "but circular. Fidelity to what? Habit? Property? A story about two made one? Vows are merely appetites making promises about their future appetites. When the future arrives dressed otherwise, the promise blinks."

"That is cynical," the Youth snapped, color rising in his cheeks. "Fidelity is a promise to a person, not to appetite."

"Then consider the person who no longer consents to the promise as once phrased," the Curator said softly. "Is chastity still a virtue when it binds the unwilling to a promise forged by the willing-but-younger? If so, chastity is captivity, and fidelity a jailer's key."

"It binds the will because it *should* bind the will," the Youth insisted, stumbling into heat. "One vows against one's lower nature."

"Lower implies higher," the Curator hummed. "Who adjudicates the altitude? Priests? Judges? Or the same appetite, promoted and costumed as 'conscience'? You call adultery a trespass; I call it a tax levied by the present upon the pretensions of the past."

From the pit came another damp ovation. The Youth flinched, then, in a burst of desperate relief, pointed—not at the Magnate, but somewhere vaguely near him. "In any case," he announced, "that is not the Magnate. Plainly an actor. The resemblance is… diabolical. The Magnate is a good man and a friend to domestic virtue."

The Curator's eyes glittered with a private joke. "But of course. Let us conclude, then, that the case is hypothetical. In this hypothetical, the husband feasts where he did not sow. Is the corn offended?"

"Females are not corn," the Youth hissed, appalled at being forced into metaphor's swamp.

"Then try a different field," the Curator said, unbothered. "Say chastity is a boundary stone. Fine. But boundary stones move—storms tilt them, hands nudge them, surveyors discover they were poorly placed. If a stone is shifted

by weather, do we prosecute the rain? If by hand, do we worship the hand for honesty or damn it for candor?”

“The law—” the Youth began, then stopped himself, remembering his own earlier sermon on divine endowments. “The *moral* law condemns it.”

“Your moral law is a ghost that knocks only when the door is already open,” the Curator said. “Notice: you do not intervene; you watch, and you name. Watching is the primer sin of chastity: it loves to witness what it forbids, so that it may forbid it with relish. Chastity is a voyeur’s halo.”

“That is vile,” the Youth said, voice thinning to wire. “I watch to be outraged.”

“You watch because the outrage flatters you,” the Curator answered, almost kindly. “It certifies you as pure while borrowing heat from what you pretend to hate. It is adultery’s twin—sanctioned by distance.”

The Magnate tossed back his head; a goblet struck the floor and rang once like a little bell. The Youth jerked as if the sound had called his name.

“Chastity,” he said, grasping for firmer ground, “exists for the good of the household, the children, the polis.”

“Then show me the household,” the Curator said, spreading a hand to indicate the whole chamber. “Here is a household where the furniture learns to blush. Here is a polis of one, with the customs of a god who eats his own offerings. Your generalities have arrived at the wrong address.”

Silence stretched—thin, sticky—while the chamber’s breath went on. The Youth wrestled with his coat buttons as if they were the argument’s knots. At last he managed a final, brittle pronouncement:

“Whatever this is, it is not him.”

“Precisely,” the Curator said, smiling as though a pupil had solved a riddle by accident. “It is the act itself, without the alibi of the actor. That is why it unsettles you: stripped of names, you cannot prosecute it, only acknowledge you are watching.”

He leaned back, smoke wreathing his satisfaction. “And once you watch, chastity is already negotiating its surrender.”

The Magnate, as if cued, turned—grinning, radiant with effort and self-approval—and lifted a hand in a genial summons.

“Kid,” he huskily yelled, voice thick with triumph, “come here.”

The Youth froze. His lips moved, rehearsing a refusal that did not find breath. The Curator merely nodded toward the steps that led down into the sunken floor, as a maître d’ might indicate a reserved table.

“Go on,” he commanded. “You don’t need to fuck her. Just look a little closer. See what a true man is. What a true man does.”

The candles leaned in; the room’s heat pressed its palm against the back of the Youth’s neck. He took a step that felt, even to him, like a footnote to his own doctrine.

VI. Chamber of the Treasury

The Magnate put on a towel, cleaned up a few of the fluids from his brow with one of the less sullied napkins and left the chamber through a separate door at the back of the chamber.

“We shall now proceed to the next chamber,” the Curator remarked somberly.

The shell-shocked youth nodded, eyes-wide and quietly obeyed the Curator’s command, following him through a separate door than they had come to. His usual bombastic proclivity for protestation momentarily silenced. For he was, for the first time since he was a small boy, uncertain of what he had just seen. Uncertain of what he had just done.

The Youth followed the curator down a small, dusty flight of stairs and into a narrow hall with a thick, gilded door. At the center of the door was a large wheel spoked wheel, not unlike that which the helmsman uses to command the course of a vessel. Though, unlike a ship’s wheel, this wheel is used to prevent curious voyagers from reaching their desirous destination: the inside of the vault. The Curator diligently entered a secret code using a small dial on the door and turned the large wheel. With some effort, he pushed it open

The door swung inward revealing a vault that seemed less built than hoarded into existence, as though every brick had been mortared with spite. The walls were paneled with iron and set deep with niches that groaned beneath their cargo of coins, notes, and shimmering ingots. Yet this was no orderly bank. The air was thick with the dust of mildew-stricken paper, of bills that had sweated themselves into illegibility. Gold statues, once the vanity of some forgotten age, sat cracked and hollow, their surfaces dulled with verdigris; silver goblets bore a bloom of tarnish so dark they resembled nothing so much as funeral urns. Jewels lay in mounds, but cloudy, their fire long choked by the greasy films of handling.

The Magnate entered through a separate door with the joy of a hog discovering its trough. He fell to his knees in a scatter of banknotes and began to wallow, rolling his bulk so that the paper clung to his damp skin, plastering him in a parody of regalia. He seized coins by the fistful and flung them over his head, cackling with childlike glee as they rained down with a metallic clatter, lodging themselves in the folds of his flesh.

Before long, he turned to his beloved exercise: pressing handfuls of money against his nude person in a manner more sacerdotal than sanitary, rubbing

the paper until it grew dark with the oils of his skin. He moaned as if each note were a relic, and soon his attentions grew more pointed, more frenzied. The scene, to any observer, could not be mistaken for reverence: the Magnate was engaged in the act of making a sacrament of his own debasement, baptizing himself in lucre with all the ardor of a saint embracing martyrdom**.** His breath grew ragged, his hands darted with increasing urgency, and his great body shook with the labor of worship.

To describe more directly what he did would be indecent; suffice it to say that he treated each banknote as though it were both altar and offering, until the paper grew limp, mottled, and slick. The once-proud effigies of ministers and monarchs blurred under his ministrations, their faces vanishing into a greasy palimpsest of devotion. When at last he cried out, it was less a shout than a porcine bellow, a sound that reverberated off the iron walls and mingled with the wet slap of currency discarded in ruin. He died a small death, and the notes—now sullied with the cloying bitter fluids of the Magnate's essence—died a significantly larger death. However, given both the Magnate and the Curator's prodigious fortunes, the notes were never long for this world, nor shall they be missed.

As this spectacle unfolded, the Curator and the Youth watched on from the vault's edge. The Curator exhaled a slow stream of smoke, his eyes fixed with the satisfaction of a naturalist observing a specimen at its most characteristic. "There," he murmured, "is the truest liturgy of man. All wealth is but the power to command another's appetite. To hoard it is to become priest of the future, to spend it is to enslave the present. Theft, commerce, speculation—they are but dialects of the same language: possession. And see how he chants it, syllable by syllable."

The Youth, pale and fluttering at the edges, tried to compose himself. "This is… thrift," he announced, his voice too high, his words too fast. "Yes—an allegory of thrift. See how he… cherishes the notes, refusing to squander them? It is a lesson in fiscal prudence."

"Prudence?" The Curator gave a soft laugh. "Correct you are, hoarding is, indeed providence, excess is indeed economy. The truly superior man worships coinage not for what it buys, but because he cannot bear to be without it. He does not own wealth; wealth owns him."

The Magnate bellowed again, this time flopping back upon a pile of coins that stuck to his sweat-slick skin in constellations. He raised one arm, clutching a

wad of stained notes like a victory standard, and shouted some incoherent boast about being the richest, the best, the only.

The Youth flinched but forced a smile, his lips trembling. “It is not… indecent,” he muttered. “It is symbolic. He shows us that money is the lifeblood of society—yes, that is all this is. A parable.”

But his eyes, locked on the sodden bills clinging to the Magnate’s thighs, betrayed his revulsion.

The Magnate lay sprawled in his heap of currency, heaving with the deep, satisfied respiration of one who has concluded a sacrament. His cheeks glistened with the labors of his liturgy, his limbs twitched with aftershocks, and the notes themselves lay draped across his torso like altar linens already spoiled by their own consecration. For a moment he seemed content to bask in his onanistic aftermath, his eyelids fluttering with a bovine serenity.

Then, as though overcome by a fresh appetite, he seized a bundle of those ruined notes and pressed them to his mouth. At first he nibbled with a kind of parody of delicacy, as if sampling hors d’oeuvres at some polite banquet. But soon he tore at them with greater gusto, chewing the paper until its pulped fibres mingled with the unctuous glazes he himself had bestowed upon them. The taste, whatever it was, did not deter him; he rolled his eyes as though each bite were a vintage to be compared against the next.

The act became ravenous. He swallowed note after note, his throat working like the piston of some obscene machine, until the wad within him was too great to be managed. He gagged, choked, clutched at his chest, and then—convulsing forward—spewed the half-digested, essence-soaked currency back into his lap. The pulp rasped against his tongue with the bitterness of ink and bile, a paper gruel that squealed in his throat. The vomit, when it came, was less expulsion than a printing press gone mad, disgorging its pages in a slurry of bile and blurred effigies. The vomit came in waves, a reduction of bile, ejaculate, and ink, a slurry of effigies and fluids, their colors blurring into a single abstract canvas. The iron walls of the chamber rang with the retching, the piles of coin shivered beneath the force of it.

When at last the paroxysm subsided, he slumped against his hoard with the smile of a diner who has eaten beyond satiety yet calls it triumph. The air was heavy now with a stench that was neither purely gastric nor purely metallic, but a compound of both — a peculiar gastronomy of insatiability, at once revolting and self-congratulatory.

The Curator, unmoved, tapped his ash into a nearby gilded chalice. “You see,” he said softly, “wealth is never consumed; it consumes. The man who devours it only proves its mastery. He eats not to live, but to reassure himself he has something to eat.”

The Youth staggered back a pace, his face caught between horror and desperate rationalization. His voice, when it emerged, was thin and cracking: “It is… performance art. Yes—he shows us the danger of avarice, by carrying it to excess. A moral tableau, a cautionary allegory.”

The Curator smiled. “Allegory is merely vice translated into polite diction. He has no need of translators.”

The Magnate, wiping his mouth with a torn bill, grinned broadly, smearing pulp across his jowls like a conqueror daubing himself in war paint. “The richest!” he bellowed, then belched so loudly the coins at his feet trembled.

VII. The Chamber of Purification

The Magnate retrieved his trousers from the corner of the vault and walked towards the Youth and the Curator. He silently passed by the Curator and the Youth through the same door they had entered in minutes before. “Come,” the curator beckoned, “let us progress to the next chamber.

The three men sauntered down an additional flight of steps, occasionally stumbling in the dark. This was a clearly a murky and dusty escalier which knew not of sun nor candle light for some time not merely because of its location so far beneath the familiar surface. For if the sun did innocently deign to shine its light upon these parts, it would quickly steal back its warm rays out of repulsion at the transgressions so oft committed in such a place.

The descent terminated with a thick wooden door. The Magnate tried to turn the handle to open the door to no avail, “Fuckin’ thing,” he bitterly spat.

The Curator pulled out an old Skelton key, quietly pushed the frustrated large man aside and slid the key neatly into a small lock beside the handle. He easily twisted the nob and, with a small grunt of effort, pushed open the door.

“I told you that you need to give me a damn key of my own,” the Magnate tersely grumbled.

The portal creaked slowly open to reveal corridor whose walls sweated with the damp of centuries, the air sour with rust and confinement. Above, narrow slits admitted no daylight, only a grudging draft that carried the faint hiss of the sea — the only reminder that a world beyond this purgatory still existed. From the ceiling hung chains and manacles, their links polished by use, clinking faintly with the promise of repetition.

The floor bore a patchwork of stains — some old and blackened, some fresh and glistening — that suggested both the medieval torture chamber and the concrete of a prison exercise yard after a riot. The smell was unmistakable: stale straw, damp stone, and the acrid trace of disinfectant applied in mockery of sanitation, as though cruelty might be sterilized by a cursory wipe. The ammonia stung like vinegar to the eye; the ordure clung like wool to the tongue; the blood was copper in the nose; the straw, sweet in its decay. Together they composed not atmosphere, but indictment.

On one side of the long chamber the rows of cages began: narrow iron pens, stacked two upon another, each scarcely large enough to hold its occupant

crouched upon haunches, the bars corroded with rust that ran like dried blood down the stone. Within them huddled progenies of every exotic shade and tongue. Gathered discriminately by some net of cruelty, their small hands clutching the bars to which their arms and legs were chained with the pale desperation of creatures too young to have learned how to resign themselves to their unenviable fates.

Opposite this dismal nursery ran a wall bristling with implements: racks, chains, wheels, brands, blades, irons — each polished by the use that had been made of it, each arranged with bureaucratic precision. The devices gleamed in the torchlight like instruments of music in a perverse orchestra, awaiting only the conductor’s hand. To one side, a row of electric lamps flickered under iron grills, their glow jaundiced, buzzing faintly like insects. The juxtaposition was obscene: ancient implements gleamed in the same torchlight as modern fixtures, as though the centuries themselves had conspired to catalogue every cruelty and make them contemporaries.

And through it all was silence, punctuated only by the muffled whimper of a caged child, the rattle of a chain stirred by the draft, the low hum of the lamps. It was the silence not of peace but of terror too exhausted to speak, the silence of the camp, the dungeon, the prison — an atmosphere so saturated with wrath that even the stone seemed to hold its breath.

The air assaulted rather than greeted, a miasma compounded over years of use and disuse, more archive than atmosphere. One detected first the sharp, acrid sting of what the polite might call “ammoniacal effusions,” the inevitable incense of bodies confined too long in iron without reprieve. Beneath it lay the ranker note of ordure, not fresh but ancient, baked into stone and straw until it became less a substance than a permanent character of the place. Threaded through this was the unmistakable copper tang of spilled vitality — blood long since clotted, then revived by damp to announce itself anew — a perfume half-metallic, half-animal, like a butcher’s block left to ripen in a cloister. And crowning all was the subtle, almost tender odor of neglect: the sweetish rot of straw moldering in corners, the oily residue of sweat absorbed into wood, the faint musk of garments never laundered but only worn thin by despair. Together they composed a fugue of corruption, an olfactory catechism that preached purity only through the gospel of decay.

The Magnate lumbered to the wall of torturous implements with the eagerness of a boy set loose in a toy shop. He seized a whip, flourished it clumsily, and with a roar of incoherent fury turned upon the cages. His mouth poured forth a storm of crude imprecations, a torrent of vulgarities

stitched together with fragments of political cant: he railed about *purity*, about *national greatness*, about *infestations,* about *vermin*, and *invaders*. The precise nature of these verbal ejaculations need not be recounted here. He struck at the youths chained to the bars, at their dirty feet on the floor, at whatever parts of their small bodies lay within reach. His words dissolving into a foam of spittle as the violence mounted. The Magnate's garments, such as they were, became as red as his face from the wounds of the young.

"¿Por que?" a particularly undocile mulatto babe sheepishly cried after a brutal strike by one of the magnate's barbs.

"SHUT THE HELL UP," the Magnate screamed in a rising tone as he struck the recalcitrant fledgling again. "YOU ILLEGALS NEVER SHUT THE FUCK UP WHEN YOU ARE TOLD!"

As he was brutally reprimanding the child, the Magnate was interrupted by a small pebble that had grazed his ear. Apparently, the bravest of the youthful captives had staged a small, sullen insurrection.

"THE FUCKING NERVE," the Magnate inchoately screamed as he seized upon an innocent child in an upper cage, unbeknownst to him not even the rebellious party. He grabbed a dull, rusty saber from the wall and proceeded with the sultry carving of flesh until the innocent victim's present vivaciousness was no more.

The Magnate threw the young corpse in the corner. "Feed it to the alligators," he commanded. "I was treated *SO UNFAIR* by that rat." He then resumed with his regularly programmed beatings of the extant victims.

The Youth staggered back, blanching, his voice breaking into shrill protest: "This—this is barbarism! Children! It cannot—" Then, catching himself, he stammered into a new register, forcing solemnity into his tone: "And yet—order must be maintained. The law must be enforced. Perhaps these are not innocents at all, but—criminals, delinquents, enemies of society. Yes, it is discipline. A stern but necessary correction."

The Curator, seated with composed elegance, nodded gravely. "Indeed. Discipline. The harshness of law is its virtue, not its failing. A father corrects, a magistrate chastises, a nation purges. Without severity, there is no order."

The Youth clung to this lifeline, nodding frantically. "Yes, severity. That is all this is. The Magnate enforces discipline where softness would invite chaos."

But as the Magnate’s violence grew ever less coherent, his blows landing not with the deliberation of judgment but with the frenzy of temper, the Curator’s expression changed. He leaned forward, eyes alight with a darker flame.

“No,” he said, voice rising, “not just discipline. Do not merely dignify it with that tepid name. This is not the law’s servant but its master. Wrath is not a tool — it is the essence. Rage is the purest expression of sovereignty, for in wrath the ruler makes no excuse and accepts no appeal. Here the veil of order is torn away, and what remains is power in its naked splendor.”

The Youth, trembling, tried again: “But the law—”

“The law,” the Curator thundered, “is the polite mask of strength. Here the mask is off. And is it not more honest, more beautiful, to see magnificent power naked than clothed in the robes of judges?”

The Magnate bellowed agreement, though it was doubtful he had followed the philosophy; his whip cracked again and again, his voice reduced to a child’s tantrum amplified by ideology.

The Youth clutched his satchel to his chest, his eyes wild, torn between outrage and the pathetic need to keep believing in order. “It is—it must be justice,” he whispered, though his voice betrayed the hollowness of the claim.

The Curator reclined once more, drawing on his cigar, and let the smoke veil his satisfied smile.

VII. The Chamber of the Sacred

The Magnate put down his final club, exhausted from the sadistic performance. The chamber was finally quiet save for the timid whimpers of its youthful permanent residents. The Magnate turned his back on his victims. “I’m done with these beaners,” he tiredly exclaimed as he hurriedly prodded towards the door.

“That must have been hard to do,” the Youth proclaimed. “But necessary.”

“Yeah, I got hard,” the Magnate triumphantly announced.

The meaning of this remark momentarily eluded the Youth, and the Curator interrupted his train of thought before he could comprehend it. “On to the next chamber, then,” he slyly announced. “This one is my personal favorite.”

This time, they ascended a separate set of stairs. At the precipice was a magnificent white gilded door adorned with ostentatious jewels and platinum trimming. The Youth, for the first time since they had entered the Island, smiled in awe of the door.

The door admitted them into what, at first glance, resembled a chapel. The air was cool, perfumed with a sweetness that could not entirely disguise its rancid undertones—incense mingled with the faint ammonia of bird droppings from the rafters. The walls were lined with niches that should have held saints but instead contained statues of grotesque hybrids: prophets crowned not with halos but with crowns of fruit, martyrs clasping not crosses but their own entrails, angels gazing not heavenward but toward their own thighs. A great cruciform dominated the altar, but its corpus was a caricature of divinity his belly protruding obscenely even in crucifixion.

At the terminus of the room above the altar towered a large, stain-glassed window, for this chamber was built into the edge of an outcropping over the cliff. It would have been the first light of day the Youth had seen since they entered the fortress’ catacombs, however the sun had long since retired. However, the room was still dimly lit with sickly sweet-scented candles and pale moonlight which had been distorted into many colors as it shone through the stained glass.

The window loomed above the altar like a frozen conflagration, a cataract of color arrested in mid-fall. It blazed with all the solemn hues of sanctity — the purples of bruised royalty, the scarlets of arterial sacrifice, the jaundiced yellows of old vellum — yet bent to a design that made sanctity its jester.

On the left panel, a gothic caricature of Pontious Pilate presided: not the majestic procurator of Roman dignity, but a petty bureaucrat in glass, his hands swollen to grotesque enormity, forever sluicing themselves in rivulets of blue that ran downward into channels of emerald filth. This water, meant to purify, gnawed instead at the very foundation of the altar, so that his absolution was indistinguishable from desecration. His face was all absence, the slack countenance of cowardice, virtue translated into vacancy.

On the right, a representation of Judas stood transfigured into a priest of betrayal. His halo, inverted, burned black with iridescent flames; his mouth fastened not on Christ's cheek but upon a coin swollen to the size of a host, which he consumed with a lover's reverence. From his lips oozed a molten silver that dribbled down his chest like an unholy chrism, baptizing his book — whose pages, writ in purple, bore but one word repeated into infinity: *NIHIL.*

And at the center — enthroned like the parody of the Lord himself — squatted the Great Beast. Its horns writhed upward into serpents that twisted letters from their own coils: *VERBUM CARO EST.* Its belly, vast as famine's, was studded with the fragments of shattered tablets, the Law made stool for its girth. Its mouth yawned wide, disgorging tatters of scripture that fell as refuse, not revelation. Its eyes, cut in garnet, smoldered with a hunger so implacable that it made of the entire window not a proclamation of truth but a confession of appetite.

Around this trinity of perversions cavorted angels corrupted into gargoyles: wings molting, instruments strung with sinew, censers vomiting dollar-shaped smoke into the nave. The borders, where Scripture should have traced its golden thread, bore instead slogans dressed in Gothic script, counterfeit beatitudes that mocked the credulous: *Blessed are the strong, for they shall inherit the Earth. Render unto Caesar, for Caesar is all. The truth shall set you free — to rule.*

Thus the glass, which should have been a lantern for the soul, became instead a mirror for depravity: an eternal homily to cowardice, treachery, and appetite, cast in colors too splendid not to seduce.

The Youth's eyes lit up with relief. He inhaled as though the smell of stale incense were a balm. "At last," he exclaimed, clasping his hands together in something like prayer. "Here is sanctuary. Here is solemnity. After so much… ah, vigorous discipline, how refreshing to partake in the rites of faith." His

smile trembled with the over-brightness of a man who had at last found footing after slipping in the mire.

The Curator gestured toward the altar with a mock gravity, his cigar extinguished now in deference to the “sacred” atmosphere. “Indeed,” he intoned, “let us proceed with the sacrament. For what is faith but appetite dressed in vestments? Let us dress it, then, in proper vestments.”

The Magnate ambled forward with the expression of a child allowed to play dress-up in his father’s wardrobe. He seized the missal laid upon the lectern, but held it upside down. “I know this,” he said with misplaced confidence, wagging a thick finger along the page. “I used to do this every week. I’m the best at this. No one reads these better than me.” Then he began to mumble the words in no particular order, pausing every so often to insert phrases of his own invention: “Amen… steak… America… very holy, very tremendous…”

The Curator’s lips twitched with amusement, though he maintained his sacerdotal tone. “Kneel, and partake of the mystery of faith,” he said, producing a chalice filled not with wine but some thick, syrupy liquid whose odor suggested both honey and rot. He held it aloft, savoring the parody. His face transfigured by the torchlight into something at once priestly and sardonic. His voice, deep and deliberate, filled the chamber with the cadence of ritual:

> *“This is no blood of covenant, but wine of dominion.*
> *This is no body broken for remission, but flesh consumed for power.*
> *Take, then, and drink—not in memory of any God,*
> *but in testimony that appetite alone is sovereign.*
> *For as often as you eat, you proclaim not His death until He come,*
> *but your victory until the world is yours.”*

“That’s not how it goes.” the Youth quizzically remarked. But the Curator ignored him as he solemnly sipped from the chalice, his eyes glinting with mock devotion.

The Magnate seized the chalice with both hands, sloshing the liquid over his fingers. “Yes, yes—I know this part. Drink up. Best wine. The holiest.” He gulped greedily, then coughed, half of it running down his shirt.

The Youth flinched, aghast. “Please—please! You must not profane—this is solemn, this is—” but words faltered.

“Shut up, kid,” the Magnate barked.

The youth lowered his head and added weakly: “Well, of course, rustic sincerity sometimes… outshines formality. He means well.”

The Curator smirked and passed the chalice back, intoning another mock-responsory:

> *“Blessed is he who does not pray, but devours;*
> *Blessed is he who does not wait, but takes;*
> *Blessed is he whose will knows no master.*
> *For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the fury—*
> *forever and without end.”*

“Amen!” the Magnate bellowed, spraying droplets down the front of his coat.

The Youth buried his face in his hands, torn between horror and rationalization. “Well—yes—of course, the common man’s rough sincerity is sometimes more pleasing to God than the pedant’s careful observance. His… his informality is authenticity. He is… he is like King David, dancing unclothed before the Ark!”

But the altar boy’s analogy collapsed under its own weight when the Magnate turned to the altar itself, seized the paten holding the “host,” and began chewing them noisily, smacking his lips, announcing between bites: “Best crackers. The finest. Better than the ones in the hotels. Fantastic.”

The Youth pressed his hands to his temples. “No—no, that cannot—that is not —” Then, scrambling for rescue, he added: “Perhaps he represents the laity, who, though lacking in refinement, yet show their devotion in simple… rustic ways.”

The Curator’s eyes glowed with private delight as he raised the parody still higher. “And thus we see that even sacrament is but another banquet. The altar is a table, the host a morsel, the ritual an appetite rehearsed. He understands instinctively what you—poor boy—would never dare admit: that the sacred is but the profane rehearsed until it calls itself holy.”

The Youth, his lip trembling, tried to protest. “That cannot be true. The sacred is real, it is divine, it is—it is—”

But he faltered as the Magnate, attempting to genuflect, lost his balance and toppled heavily into a candelabrum, sending wax sputtering across the floor. He rose with a laugh, brushing soot from his jacket. “Nailed it. Best service. Everyone says so.”

The Curator allowed himself at last a quiet laugh. “Yes. Sacred indeed.”

The Youth closed his eyes, as if to shut out both sight and sound. “It is only… a different liturgy,” he muttered. “An unfamiliar rite. Nothing more.”

But the Curator knew, and the Magnate never would, that the chamber was not a church but a jest—a sacrilege too subtle for the Magnate to notice, too plain for the Youth to grasp, and too delicious for the Curator to resist. Deep in the shallow recesses of The Youth’s feeble mind this realization flickered, only to be extinguished by the torrid psychic waters of denial.

IX. The Chamber of the Truth

“Come,” the Curator remarked. “It is time for the final Chamber.”

The three men left the mock chapel, and descended down yet another staircase which, at its base, had a non-descript door. The door yielded not upon a room but upon a corridor so vast it mocked the very idea of passage. Its walls rose out of sight, every inch clad in glass: tall panels, narrow panes, ovals and lozenges, each warped to its own lunacy. Some stretched the body into grotesque elongation, others flattened it into parody, others still split the form into a chorus of fragments that argued silently with one another. Torches burned behind the glass so that every reflection shimmered with feverish vitality, as though the walls themselves were alive and mocking.

The atmosphere of the hall pressed down upon the skin with the clammy persistence of a fever, thick yet curiously cold, as though the air itself had been distilled of vitality and reduced to some spectral condensation. Each breath carried a faint taint — the smell of glass that has been too long handled, sharp and mineral, mixed with the dusty musk of moth-eaten velvet and the acrid sweetness of torches burning oil of uncertain provenance. It was an air that clung to the tongue, coating it with the faint bitterness of metal, so that speech felt weighted before it even left the lips.

The mirrors themselves, which lined the walls from paving to vault, gave off their own odor, the peculiar reek of polished surfaces overheated by too much scrutiny: part lampblack, part vinegar, part the faint medicinal tang of quicksilver bleeding through its backing. Their warped reflections trembled with the vibration of the torchlight, which sputtered in iron sconces, each flame humming faintly as if it were straining to sustain itself. The sound was insidious: no single crackle or hiss was loud, but together they formed a kind of chorus, a dry whisper that seemed to originate in the very glass.

The floor gave back no honest echo. Each footfall was swallowed into a soft murmur, as if the stone itself conspired with the reflections to absorb and confound. The space was neither warm nor cold, but some dissonant and uncanny interval between the two — a neutrality so absolute that it became hostile, as though the very temperature were mocking the notion of comfort. One felt suspended, not in a corridor but in a deception so total that even the body no longer trusted its own bearings.

And when one moved, the air vibrated in mockery: not with the pure resonance of music, but with the thin, jangled overtone of glass struck at

different pitches. It was as though every reflection trembled in faint laughter, every warped face chuckling just beyond the edge of audibility. The visitor was left not merely to see their own image multiplied, but to smell its corruption, to breathe its falsity, to hear its derision. The chamber was not a mirror of perception, but sensory experience refracted until it mocked the very appetite for veracity.

“Is this it?” the Youth innocently inquired as they entered.

“This is not a chamber,” the Curator announced gravely, through a smirk and a puff of cigar. “It is a mere vestibule, a passage into the final truth. Pay it no more attention than you would to extras in a play.” He smiled thinly. “For what is democratic discourse, but a stage set erected to disguise the actors from themselves?”

The Youth brightened at this, eager for a debate that did not involve blood or screams. “Yes,” he interjected, puffing his chest. “Exactly so! Politics is a noble theatre, a forum of argument. Truth arises in contestation—”But his voice faltered as he caught sight of his own face in the nearest mirror, distorted so that his brow was grotesquely swollen, his mouth thin and querulous.

The Curator smiled through the smoke. “Fascinating,” he chided, “did you not yourself say relativistic disregard for truth is the intellectual disease of our age?”

He stopped, frowned, and began again, now gesturing toward the reflection as though it were a heckler. “No—you have misunderstood me. I did *not* say relativism. I said argument produces truth, not destroys it!”

The Curator chuckled into his sleeve.

Meanwhile the Magnate had wandered ahead, mesmerized by the infinite parade of his own bulk, his golden hair refracted into a million blurred coronets. He roared in delight, pounding his chest. “They love me! Look—they’re all cheering! Every one of them says I’m the best!” He slapped a mirror so hard it trembled on its frame. “Thank you, thank you! Greatest crowd, greatest turnout, bigger than any in history!”

His echoes, flung back from every panel, multiplied his nonsense into a thunderous ovation. He spun in circles, basking in the sound of his own voice returned to him a hundredfold. So intoxicated was he with this counterfeit adulation that he never noticed when one reflection lagged a fraction behind, or when another grimaced at his smile.

The Youth, increasingly agitated, had now launched into a full disputation with his warped double. “You misrepresent me!” he shouted, wagging a finger at the glass. “I never claimed natural rights were man-made, I said law *secures* them! You twist my words, sir! Twisting is not refutation! It’s a straw man!” His reflection, mouthing his fury half a beat behind, infuriated him further. He jabbed his finger harder against the mirror, leaving a greasy crescent on the glass. “Answer me! Defend yourself if you can!”

The Curator could contain himself no longer. He threw back his head and loosed a guffaw so rich it shook the torchlight. Smoke curled from his nostrils like incense as he laughed and laughed, until even the mirrors seemed to ripple with amusement.

The Magnate was too entranced by his phantom audience to notice, bowing and grinning, applauding himself with both hands. The Youth, red-faced and spluttering, battered the mirror with logic as though syllogisms could penetrate glass.

And so the three of them passed on, deeper into the corridor, each trapped in his own farce: the Magnate in adulation, the Youth in disputation, the Curator in derision. Only the Curator knew that the passage itself was a Chamber, and that the “truth” it reflected was not in the glass but in their postures before it.

X. The Chamber of Liberation

At the end of the hall, two climbed down a long set of stairs. Surrounding them was nothing but mortar, thick stone blocks, and the stairway was adorned with nary a carpet nor tile but merely varied thicknesses of dirt and dust and grime on bare cement. This flight stood in stark contrast to the indulgent luxury of the rest of the mansion heretofore beheld by the Youth. And as they descended deeper underground, he could feel his apprehension grow.

“Where are we going?” the Youth innocently and breathlessly asked.

“The final chamber,” the Curator grimly remarked.

At the bottom of the steps, the Magnate had somehow already descended and now stood in front of an ancient, thick wooden door well-worn from apparent centuries of use and abuse. The door was adorned with thick metal hinges and locks, with a small window with but bars in it. The Magnate still reeked of the putrid actions of the prior chambers, but was now sporting a cleanly tailored suit and red cravat. However finely tailored and steam-pressed the jacket, however, no amount of tailoring and laundry could suppress the fact that the white linen of his dress shirt was still sullied by remnant fluids of his erstwhile activities.

It was colder here, though the air carried no true freshness—only the stilled, exhausted chill of stone that had forgotten daylight. The chamber had no ornament but its own negations: no tapestries, no cushions, no distractions for the senses. Even the damp was parsimonious, beading only in the high corners, as if reluctant to offer the comfort of sound. A single lamp, its flame caged in black wire, presided like a minor bureaucrat over the void, ensuring just enough light for despair to take inventory.

The walls bore the unyielding expression of those who had seen too many confessions wrung out by means other than persuasion. Their surface—neither quite wet nor quite dry—resembled the skin of some ancient beast that had died on its knees and been built over. Iron rings in the stone served no clear present purpose but suggested a library of past ones. The floor was honest about its contempt: it did not bother to be level.

The Magnate entered first, his steps ringing as if the stone were mildly offended at being trodden by so coarse a rhythm. He rubbed his hands together, the sound absurdly domestic in this mortuary for illusions.

“This,” he declared, “is where we fix the attitude problem.”

The Youth stiffened, his eyes darting to the door they’d just come through. “There’s no problem. I—merely—I do not… partake. I am not like—like that.” His voice stumbled over the last word, as though it were a blasphemy.

The Curator followed, shutting the door with the slow assurance of a man who enjoyed doors as much for their closing as their opening. He set his cigar between his fingers and regarded the Youth with a calm that was itself a species of pressure.

“You mistake this for punishment,” he said evenly. “It is correction. A refinement of your reluctance into the more productive alloy of obedience.”

“I obey the moral law,” the Youth said hotly, though his voice echoed thin in the stone. “And the moral law condemns—”

The Magnate cut him off with a laugh that did not warm the air. “Damns you to be the biggest buzzkill in the world, you mean. I’ve seen statues more fun at a party.”

The Youth flushed, drawing himself up. “I have principles.”

“Principles,” the Magnate said, stepping closer, “are what losers hide behind when they don’t have the balls to win.”

The Curator’s smile moved only at the corners. “Consider, my young friend, that refusal is a kind of participation. The virgin at the feast still lends the feast its flavor—if only by making the rest seem more seasoned.”

“I am not seasoning!” the Youth burst out, trembling between indignation and some more private, more dangerous fear. “And what you’ve done upstairs—it was wrong. It is wrong.”

“Wrong?” the Magnate repeated, incredulous. “You didn’t even watch right. You kept looking away like you were scared the fun might splash you.”

The Curator spread his hands mildly. “Splash is the point. The wine’s color is in the spill. Purity, kept bottled, sours.”

“I will not—” the Youth began, but the Magnate was suddenly on him, the distance between them devoured in three steps. One hand clamped the Youth’s shoulder, spun him against the wall. The first punch landed high in the ribs, a percussion that doubled the Youth over before the next caught his jaw. The third was less a strike than a shove so violent it reseated him against the stones.

“You think you’re better than me?” the Magnate growled between blows. “You think anyone likes the guy who says ‘no’ all the time? You ruin the mood, you ruin the night, you ruin everything.”

The Youth’s protests dissolved into grunts and half-formed appeals to reason, to God, to decency. Each was answered with the same blunt rebuttal: a fist, a forearm, a knee placed where it would leave its argument in bruise. Eventually, the Youth’s bashful verge became the Magnate’s target of contempt, with a continuous rhythm of ferocious contact until its innocent white demeaner had blackened to the hue of a jaded pupil’s valediction cap. By the time the Magnate’s endowment was involved, the Youth’s vocal protestations had been strained like a transcendental deduction gone viciously circular, reduced to the level of muted whimpers.

The Curator did not intervene. He merely watched, each impact reflected in his eyes like an actor’s cue hit precisely on time. Now and again, he drew from his cigar, the exhalations drifting upward as if bored by gravity.

When at last the Magnate stepped back, breathing hard but smiling like a man satisfied with a carpentry project, the Youth slid down the wall to a seat on the floor. Both his lips bled; one eye was already plotting its slow retreat into swelling.

“Pathetic,” the Magnate said, straightening his jacket. “Lock him up.”

The Curator inclined his head and gestured toward a low iron door set into the far wall. The Magnate hauled the Youth to his feet and half-dragged, half-shoved him toward it. The hinges gave a noise like someone laughing into a handkerchief.

Beyond was a cell barely the width of a coffin, with a cot that looked less like bedding than a folded sigh. The air in it did not move. The Magnate shoved him inside.

“You can think about your moral law in here,” he said, and slammed the door.

The Curator lingered a moment, peering through the small barred opening. “Do not be lonely,” he said gently. “You are in the company of every principle that ever refused to compromise. They make poor cellmates, but excellent wardens.”

Then the bolt slid home. Footsteps receded. The Youth coughed up some blood and heaved a little bile, finally completing the night’s feature of every

various and sundry sort of bodily fluid. He teared up as the silence settled in, the kind that listens to you more than you listen to it.

Epilogue

It was late afternoon in the public house, though the light outside could not be seen from within; the room was lit by that cold and unwavering glow which issues from the rectangular apparatuses now found in every such establishment. These contrivances, whose name I have never properly learned—for they are neither lantern nor window, though they present themselves as a kind of both—display upon their flat surface a succession of moving images accompanied by a voice that seems to proceed from no visible mouth. I am told that such devices speak to the whole world at once, though the voice has no interest in hearing the world reply.

The Former Youth sat alone at a small table by the far wall, his coat neatly folded beside him. His hands cradled a plain mug of heifer milk, pallid and lukewarm, a draught so infantile it seemed less a beverage than a surrender. He sipped it with the solemnity of communion, yet its flavor was thin, chalky, and without promise. He drank it slowly, for he could never stomach the burning corruption of the publican’s stronger offerings. The habit was long ingrained. There were many habits that had endured.

The years had neither emboldened nor embittered him. They had only thinned him, as years do—paring down the outward man until only the most essential shapes of thought and reflex remained. His hair was still dark, though streaked with frost, and his eyes had acquired that soft, unreflecting sheen common to those who have long since ceased to expect surprise.

The glowing apparatus above the bar changed its appearance. The voice now announced the accession of a new Magistrate, and the moving image resolved into a familiar figure: the broad face, the gilded hair thinned but no less jauntily arranged, the small, satisfied eyes. The man had grown heavier, but not slower; he seemed to carry the weight as an emblem of plenty. He was flanked by flags, and before him stood a host of men in sober dress, enthusiastically though applauding at measured, though confused, intervals.

The Former Youth watched without moving. The noise of the public house faded until only the voice of the apparatus and the slow rhythm of his own breathing remained. He remembered the Isle—the chambers, the long nights, the locked cell. He remembered the Curator, whose grave now lay untended somewhere beneath a stone already half-effaced by weather. He remembered, too, the Magnate—now the Magistrate—whose hand had struck him down, whose member had penetrated, and whose laughter and boasts had filled those damp corridors.

The apparatus spoke of order, of strength, of the firm hand that would preserve the Nation. The image of the Magistrate nodded gravely, then smiled, the way a man smiles when certain of his place in the world.

The Fromer Youth trembled and knocked over his mug of heifer milk. A tear—unexpected, unwilled—welled in the Former Youth’s eye and rolled down his cheek. He did not wipe it away. He did not look to see if anyone had noticed. His gaze remained fixed upon the illuminated surface.

Yes. The Magistrate was right. The world was safer now. The law was in its proper hands.

He loved the Magistrate.